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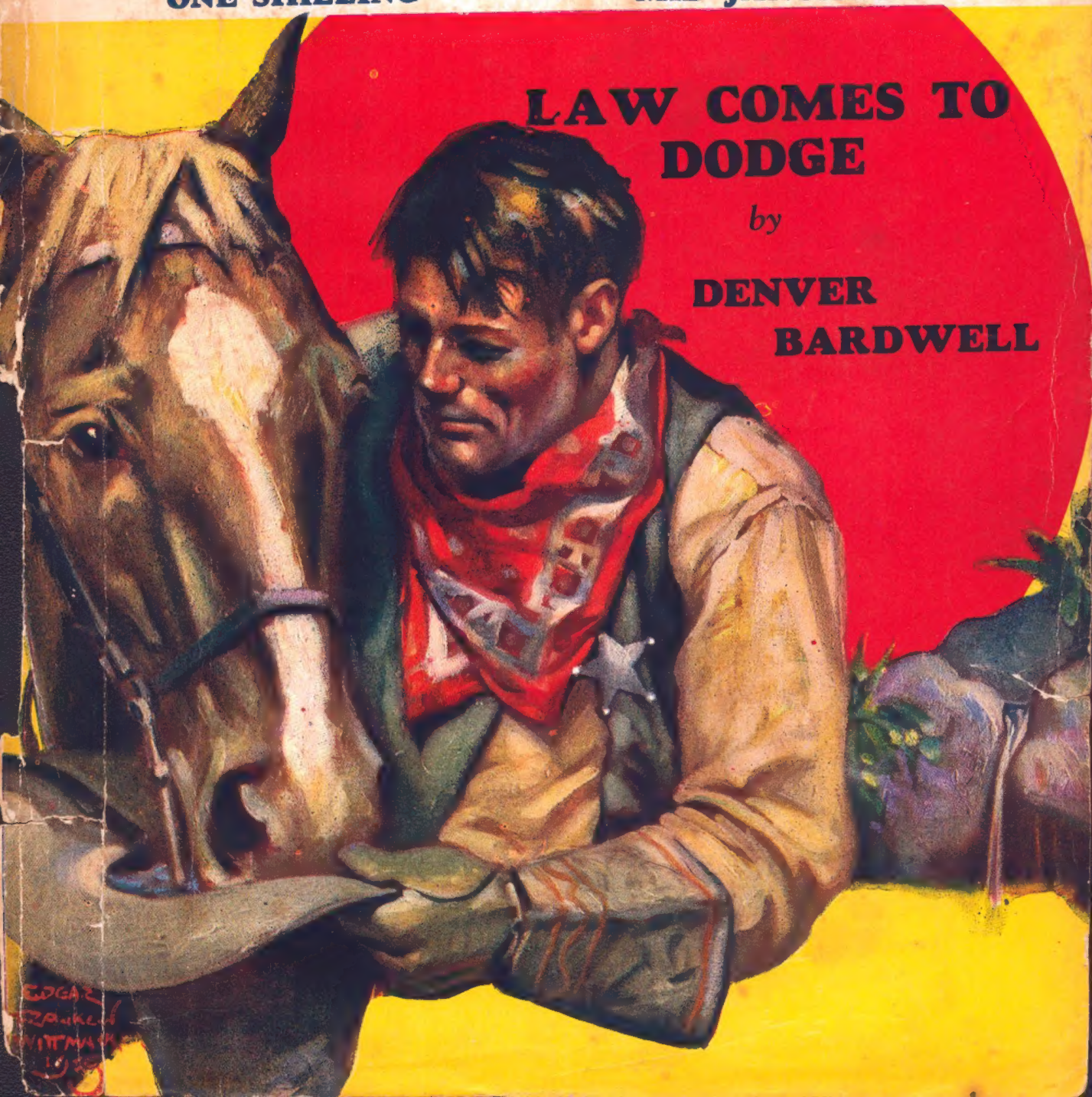
ONE SHILLING MID JANUARY



LAW COMES TO DODGE

by

DENVER BARDWELL

FIRESIDE GHOST STORIES

1/=

FROM time immemorial the winter fireside has been the place to read tales of the eerie and of the uncanny. Somehow one cannot visualise ghosts and summer sunshine. They fail to materialise against the blue sky, but when winter days come and we gather round the cheerful blaze, the atmosphere is more congenial to ghostly visitors.

In this issue the traditional ghost story is avoided in favour of unusual and inexplicable occurrences; the magic talisman stone which guides the Senigambian people and the legendary character of the Albatross are instances of this design.

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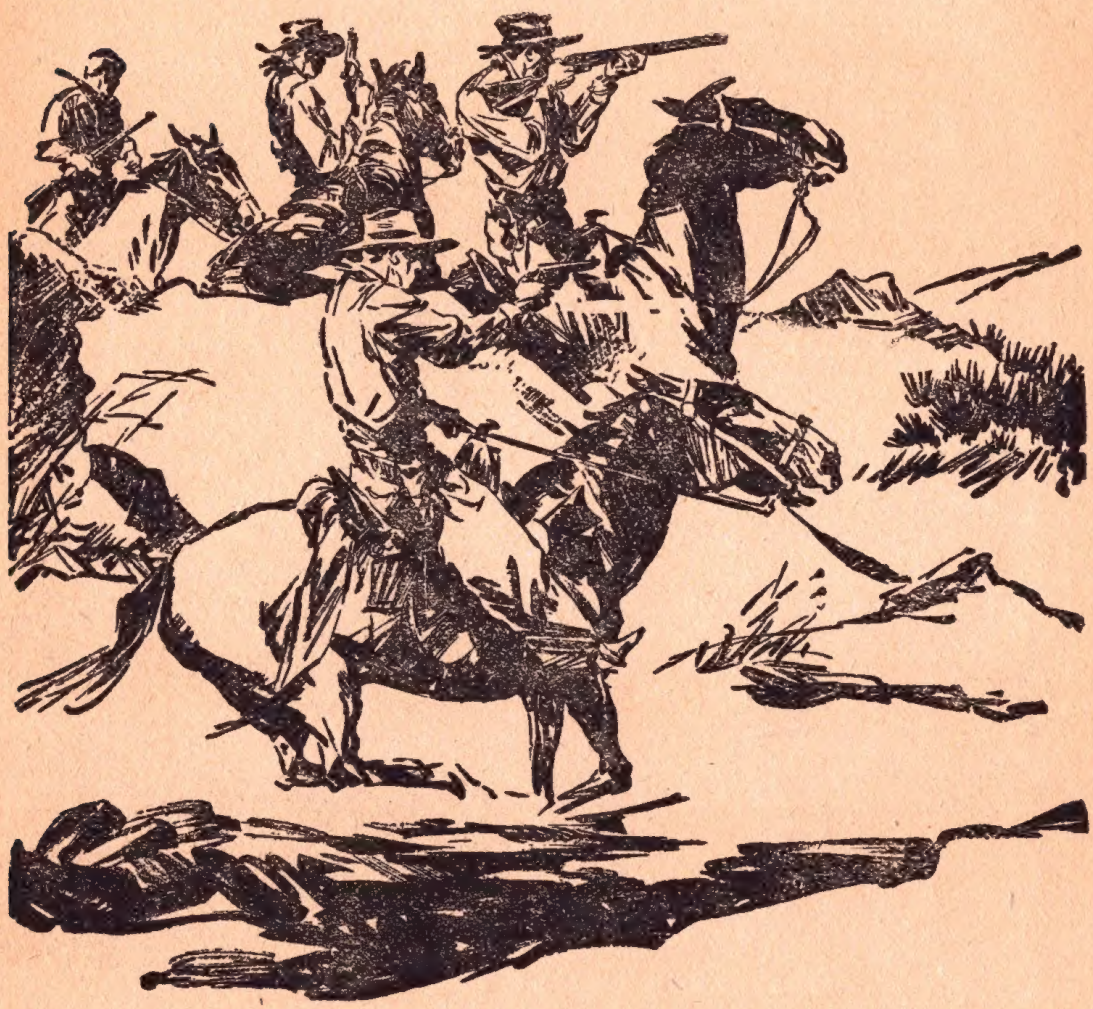
LAW COMES TO DODGE



CHAPTER I

CLOUDY skies helped to bring the night quickly. Darkness was gathering over the bellowing, rumbling herd of three thousand south Texas cattle. After permitting the hungry animals a few late afternoon hours of grazing, Bob Fannin and his dozen riders had just finished bunching the big herd on the wide swale that was to be the night's bedding ground.

One whole week of steady rain had delayed the herd drive up the Chisholm Trail. The shove from the Canadian River over to the swollen banks of the Cimarron had taken twice the ordinary time. And now, facing the last muddy, turbulent river barrier before delivery at Dodge City, the greater menace of the ruthless "tickers" added their likely attack to the more visible terrors of nature.

Bob Fannin rode around the noisy, horn-clacking, lowing herd, walking his horse, calling in low, firm voice to other riders here and there, giving final orders for the night watch. To each of the six men he left on the first watch he issued the same instructions.

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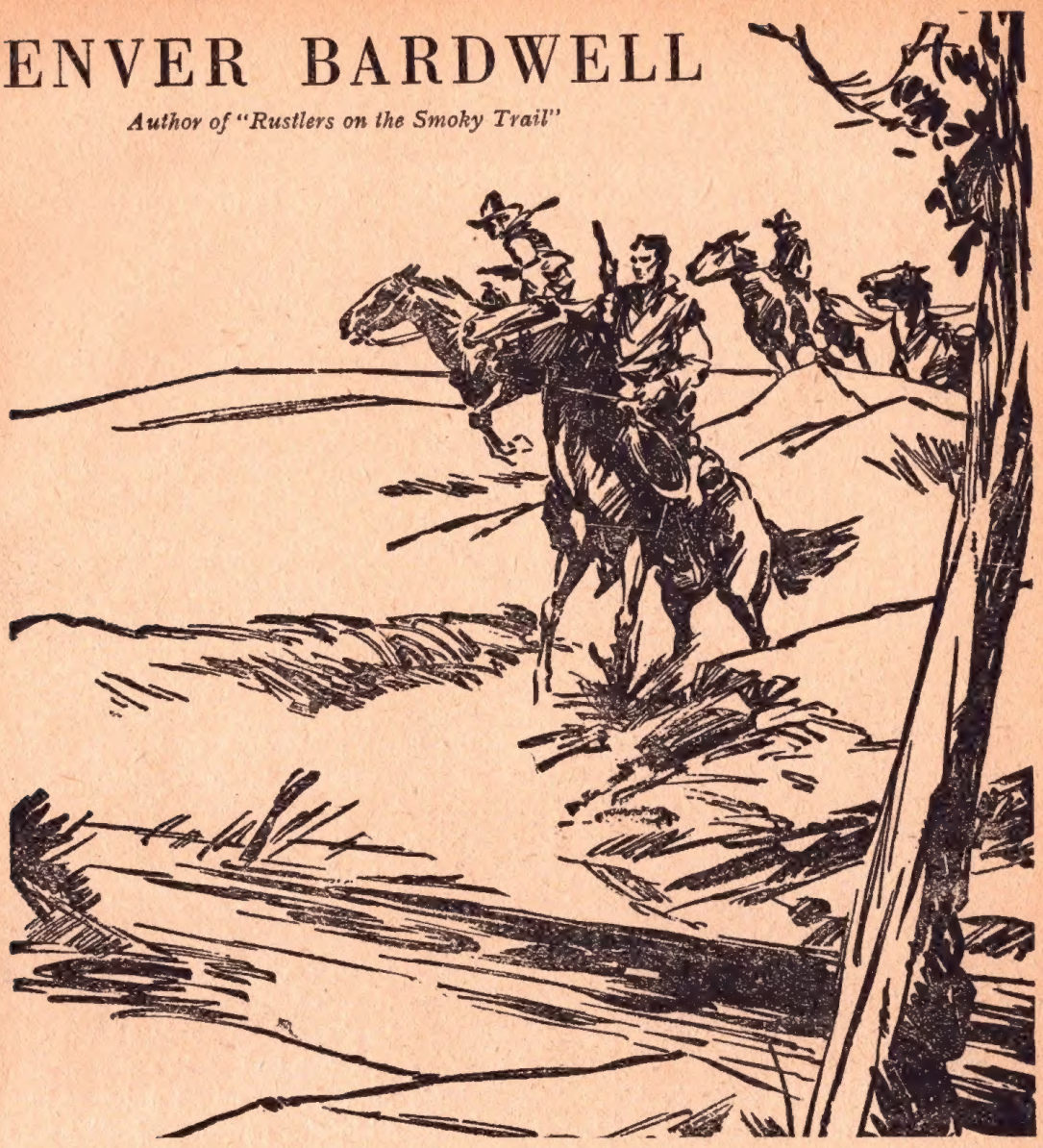
DENVER BARDWELL

Author of "Rustlers on the Smoky Trail"



"We're in 'ticker' country now," he told them. "That's why we gotta keep six men on night herd instead o' two. Keep your eyes peeled plenty wide and watchful for them damn' 'tickers' so they don't jump us and stampede these critters. Six men'll come out at midnight to spell you for a little snooze 'fore we take 'em acrost in the morning."

Young Fannin was just twenty-four, tall and lithe of build and bronzed on his handsome, firm-jawed features. He was quiet and reticent by nature, but his keen grey eyes were alert and observant of everything about him at all times. If one looked into those serious, intent eyes and studied the firm, confident manner of the youth at his work, there could be no surprise that five big Texas ranchers had chosen him to deliver their beeves to the distant railroad terminal in Kansas.

He came to the last of the six men he had picked for the first night watch. This was his younger brother, Tom Fannin, a happy, singing tow-head with the fuzz of boyhood still on his pugnacious chin. Nearly a thousand miles of nerve-frazzling trail driving had not smothered the thrill Tom Fannin enjoyed on this,

his first trail herding. He idolised his quiet, capable older brother and would gladly take any risks and do double duty uncomplainingly to help assure Bob's completion of his first trail-bossing job. Bob had been up the trail twice before, but this was his first great responsibility bossing a drive. Young Tom, grinning, proudly happy, elected to share that responsibility.

The six cowboys whom Bob released had severally ridden away toward the chuck wagon and camp, anxious to feed their ravenous appetites and snatch their allotted few hours of sleep. Bob stood his pony there a hundred yards up the slope from the nearest of the herd and exchanged a few parting words with his brother. In his way he was as proud of the youngster as Tom was of him, for the boy had measured up in every way to a man's sized job on this long, trying drive.

"Keep both eyes open for 'tickers' to-night, Tom," Bob counselled the boy. "If they gonna jump us, it'll be to-night 'fore we can prod these cows acrost into Kansas to-morrow."

"Gee whizz, Bob," Tom exclaimed, his blue eyes sparkling above his happy grin, "I'll sure have eyes back'ards and for'ards all night. Nobody'd better try monkey-shines a-buttin' in on us now. I'm ready."

He straightened a trifle in his saddle, proudly, and tapped right hand to the .45 which lay heavily on his slender hip. Had not Bob Fannin, the fastest gun-fanner in the whole world, taught him how to handle that gun until his hands were very nearly the match of Bob's own in the lightning manipulation of the deadly weapon?

BOB's eyes became a shade more serious as he anxiously studied the exuberant lad's face. He nudged his pony close beside the one Tom straddled and put a hand affectionately on his young brother's arm.

"Don't take no chances, younker," he advised. " 'Member I got two promises to keep on this drive—one to my bosses to get these here critters safe in the railroad chutes at Dodge, the other'n to Mother to bring you back safe home. You gonna help your ol' bud keep that promise?"

"Sure thing, Bob," Tom laughed. "I'm no tadpole any more. I can take care o' myself. Don't worry none."

"See that you do, kiddo," Bob reined his horse away. "You know I'd rather lose forty herds like this than have to tell Ma you'd never come home again. Them 'ticker' fellers throw a lotta lead mighty careless as to who they hit when they tangle on a snag in running off a herd."

"Gosh, Bob, are they straight-out rustlers?" Tom asked.

"They're worse than reg'lar rustlers," Bob assured him. "They claim to be working with the law, keeping Texas cattle ticks and fever outa Kansas and the north ranges. A few years ago when they started holding up the first herds that drove up towards Ft. Scott acrost the Indian Nations they had some show o' law back o' them. Now they've just turned into slick cattle rustlers in a big way, 'cause they're better organised for making 'way with the herds they take. Once they get the drop on a trail crew and take their herd away, they leave you afoot and helpless. We gotta see they don't do that to us. I'll be seeing you come midnight, pardner. Ride herd!"

He touched the pony's flanks lightly with spurs and loped away toward camp over an intervening ridge. Tom Fannin turned his mount into the slow walk of the night herder, humming a song and circling around at a discreet distance from the outer fringes of the herd. Some of the cattle were already bedding down. A few restless ones still hunted a sprig of grass here and there and lowed hungrily toward the quietly circumnavigating riders who they had long since learned would bar them from wandering out upon the prairie in search of more abundant grass.

Bob rode up to the back end of the

chuck wagon and dismounted, unsaddling his pony there. He turned the pony over to the night wrangler to put with the other horses and walked toward the fire, calling across his shoulder to the wrangler as he went.

"Don't do no dozing on the job tonight, Paddy," he advised. "If them tickers are gonna jump us, they'll do it right here, this side o' the Cimarron tonight. I'll be out to help you watch soon's I eat a bite."

"I got the ol' cannon loaded up for 'em," Paddy McIlshane informed, leading the horse away to turn out with the grazing remuda a few hundred yards up river.

"Ol' Paddy with his busted leg'd be plumb helpless if the tickers stampede that remuda," Slim Tyler, one of the younger of the cowboys around the campfire commented.

"Yeah, but he'd sure mess 'em up plenty while they was a-doin' the stampedin'," Sam Lucas, segundo in command to Bob Fannin, declared. "Paddy would rather throw hot lead at human coyotes than eat good beef-steak like this when he's starvin'."

Sam was chewing lustily on a big biscuit and steak sandwich, taking sips of steaming black coffee from a tin cup. "Walla Walla" Wallace, trail cook, cursed at the licking flames as he prodded an enormous mass of frying steak in a wide skillet. He picked out two or three pieces of the meat, forking them into a tin plate for Bob Fannin.

It was pitch dark a few yards away from the campfire now. Seven men, including Bob Fannin, stood about, or sat on saddle blankets within the warming radiance of the fire, eating, and watched busy, efficient old Walla Walla do his magic with skillet and "Dutch" baking oven. When a fresh ovenful of hot biscuits was turned out they did not last long. Many hungry men grabbed them, tearing them open, blowing upon them, fanning them in the air to cool them off enough for eating, then slipped pieces of gravy-softened steak between the biscuits. With strong bodies and healthy appetites for a starter, no royal feast was ever more delicious, nor half so nourishing as these end-of-the-day campfire suppers of hungry cowboys on the trail.

Bob Fannin took his plate of steak and biscuits and sat on the chuckwagon tongue while he ate. He only half listened to the easy, bantering talk of the men, for the thought was ever present with him now of the danger his herd and trail crew faced. Within the past year entirely too many herds had been either stampeded and hopelessly scattered by the "tickers," or brazenly driven off in true rustler style. Some resisting members of the attending trail crews were killed, others left stranded. This had always happened near the Kansas line, after all the hard work of the long trail drive had been practically finished.

It is quite likely that an older, more experienced trail drive boss would not have been so anxious as was young Bob Fannin. This was his first big job. Five ranchers had entrusted him with six hundred head of cattle apiece and promised him that if he delivered a reasonable number of them safely to the buyers in Dodge City he would be given much bigger herds to drive up in following years. That meant bigger money and the means of establishing his own ranch. It meant that a few years hence the Fannin Brothers' brand (that was Tom and himself) would be as widely known and numerous as that of the Crosson Brothers was now. Some day he and Tom would be big men in the big State of Texas. Of such ambitious designs youth for ever spins its texture of dreams.

HE came out of his reverie to hear some of his men arguing over the beauty and singing talent of Cherry Maris. Some who had not been up the trail before had to ask questions of the veterans concerning the famous "Nightingale of Dodge City." It made Bob uncomfortable to hear his trail mates already planning their celebration at the

Cowboys' Oasis in Dodge City where their pay-roll would soon be blown, leaving them with scarce means of returning home to south Texas.

On Bob Fannin's previous trail drives his few visits to the Oasis had been merely routine duty performed. His fellow-cowboys from Texas had a vexatious habit of starting trouble when aflame with drink and as a loyal Texan he had had to clan with his own. More than once his cold, sober eyes had prevented gun play, and on several occasions, after trouble had started, his quick throw of lead had saved the lives of irresponsible mates. This had built for him a reputation as a quick-triggered, deadshot gunman, which was a reputation hateful to him.

The talk of him as "Shut-Mouth" Fannin, "the two-gun Texas boy that's plumb dangerous to monkey with," had made him discard one of his guns in an endeavour to live down the evil notoriety which a few necessary killings had brought to his name.

Cherry Maris, most beautiful dance-hall singer at the Oasis, had deigned to stop before his obscure table once and sing two whole lines of a song to him alone. It embarrassed him so much that he had left the Oasis without knowing that the singer thus honouring him was the famous beauty of whom his cowboy friends talked so much.

"Aw, she's the purtiest little thing you ever seen," Sam Lucas was telling a questioner. "An' she ain't like the other gals in such places. She's real quality. If she comes down off'n the stage a-singin' 'mongst the crowd, you better not do no cuttin' up with her. She's got eyes so blue a Texas bluebonnet'd look pale 'long side o' them, an' man alive! How she kin sizzle vou right through an' through with 'em if you try to act up with her. An' man, she's got hair so red——"

"Hell, Sam," Orie Singleton interrupted, "she ain't got red hair. It's jest exactly like east Texas dark brown clay, only it shines, lively like, sorta the way corn silk shines the first morning after it's busted outa the green shuck."

"And I guess you fellers'll be throwing your money at her feet when she sings," Bob arose and broke into the raving talk, "just like the others that don't know better."

He threw his empty tin plate and cup into the tub provided for such by Walla Walla Wallace. The other men had finished eating; some were rolling querlies; a few were shaking out blankets preparatory for shortened hours of much needed sleep.

"Two of us've gotta stand watch," Bob told the man. "I'll have Paddy move the remuda in a bit closer, and stand watch with him while you fellers snatch your shut-eye. Better sleep with your smokepieces right handy."

"Aw, you're all worked up over nothin', Bob," Sam Lucas told him. "The tickers ain't gonna swim the Cimarron after us an' it all floodin' bank full like it is."

"Just the same, I'm not taking no chances," Bob replied firmly. "You fellers sleep with your boots on to-night, and with guns right handy. I'm gonna bring in seven fresh horses right away and have 'em saddled and ready for us."

He turned away from the campfire and headed into the darkness toward where Paddy McIlshane guarded the crew's cow ponies and Walla Walla's chuck-wagon horses. It had been scarcely fifteen minutes since the last streaks of fading grey light had gone from the broken clouds on the western horizon.

Bob's caution, early as it was, was not early enough. He had not disappeared wholly into the shrouding darkness when every man about the fire, including old Walla Walla himself, was brought up grabbing for guns.

A WILD, short yell of warning came on the night air from the straining voice of Paddy McIlshane. Immediately there followed a furious burst of six-gun shots up there in the direction of the horse remuda. A chorus of shouts followed as many men were obviously stampeding the horses.

"Come on, everybody!" Bob Fannin shouted and grabbed a lariat from the first saddle in his way there upon the ground. "Snatch a lariat, fellers, and try to snake it on a horse 'fore they run 'em clear off—and use your guns on the devils doing the stampeding!"

He was already far out into the darkness as he shouted the last words, coiled rope in one hand, the other still free to go for gun if he could catch sight of the attackers.

Paddy McIlshane was again shouting, calling for help in one breath and pouring curses at the stampeders with the next, all the time throwing shot after shot into the night. The thunder of forty suddenly frightened horses, many screaming in their fright, as they streamed out across the prairie, smote the ears of Bob Fannin as he raced madly through the darkness.

He cut off to the left from the direction leading to where the herd of ponies had been, for the sounds of scores of running feet showed that the stampede was being turned around the camp in that direction, pointing toward the cattle herd a half-mile distant. While Paddy McIlshane's voice still drilled into his ears he saw the shadowy form of a man on a horse riding wildly along on the fringes of the frightened pony herd. Instantly his hand grasped and lifted gun, firing as he ran.

The form astride the horse dropped out of the saddle, but the horse ran on and became invisible. Bob sprinted past the spot where the rider had fallen. He unlimbered the rope in his hand as he saw more riderless horses flitting by like wraiths of the night. He made a cast. The loop, more by lucky chance than by any precision of throw in that pall of darkness, fell over the head of a horse.

Bob felt the sudden powerful jerk on the rope that told his throw had gone true. He braced his booted feet and with heartening thrill he felt the animal he had roped halt its headlong flight. It was necessary for him to stagger on but a few paces, ploughing high heels in the softened earth, before the horse, used to the feel of rope on its neck, stopped.

A horse thundered upon Bob then. He thought it was riderless. Just as he moved to dodge it, a man upon the horse's back leaned out of the saddle and fired point-blank at the youthful trail boss, the flame of the gun blinding him and singeing his face. The rope in his hand jerked violently and he lost it as he was ridden down by his attacker's horse. A hoof struck his head and he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER II

AS consciousness began to seep back for Bob Fannin his first hazy thought was that he lay in his blankets in the camp, with everybody asleep. The world was so quiet around him. Then all in one flashing second he heard a man groaning, felt the chilly, wet ground under him and became aware of a strange dizziness when he sat up.

His hand felt of a stinging big lump on the back of his head. Came again the sound of a man's groan very near. Memory awoke in Bob with a shocking surge. He jumped up and staggered, still dizzy, toward the groans, then stopped, listening to a new sound. Away off across the prairie he heard a faint medley of many voices. He listened to them for a moment. They seemed to be coming toward him, but there was no thump of horse-hoofs.

He fumbled in his pocket for the water-

proof match-box which he had made from ten-gauge shotgun brass shells. He found the man who was groaning weakly and kneeled down beside him, striking a match.

The man was a stranger to Bob, a middle-aged fellow with a long, lean face, drooping, untrained sandy moustache and sunken eyes that now stared at Bob in the match-glare with wild, desperate appeal. The young trail boss could see that death was clasping the fellow very close.

"They got me, Buffalo," the prostrate man spoke in a dry, straining voice and gasped for breath with which to speak further. "They sure—got me—I'm goin' —goin', Buffalo. Give my part to—to—give my——"

He gasped for more breath, his eyes half closed as if he felt drowsiness coming upon him. Bob wondered who "Buffalo" could be. He wanted very much to know. Buffalo was the nickname of many men in the buffalo country. This particular "Buffalo" must have been this man's leader on this raid. Who was he? Vaguely Bob remembered having heard of a notorious "Buffalo" Judson. Could it be he? The match spluttered and went out. Bob struck another one hastily and bent over the man, putting his left hand under the fellow's head.

"I'm not Buffalo," he told the dying man softly, "but I'll tell him what you say. What is Buffalo's last name? Tell me so I can go tell him what you say."

The man's eyes quivered and opened a little wider, but they were already glazing, staring vacantly. His throat rattled and his tongue struggled weakly to wet the lips under his scraggly drooping moustache. He drew a long breath with a great effort and made a grimace of pain.

"Buffalo—Judson—find Garon—tell Garon—tell——"

He gasped once more convulsively and then lay very quietly, his mouth open. The cold stare of death came into his eyes. All life had left him. Bob laid his head back upon the ground and stood up, flipping the match away. He remembered shooting a man out of his saddle just before that horse-hoof had knocked him out. This must be the one.

The voices came rapidly nearer across the prairie. Bob's holster was empty. He stooped and felt for the dead man's gun, but his holster was also empty. Very likely the fellow had held his gun in hand when shot and had dropped it somewhere near. Bob began looking for his own gun back over the ground toward where he had regained consciousness. He had to strike another match before he found the .45 near the spot where he had fallen.

Someone shouted out on the prairie at sight of the flashing match.

"Is that you, Bob?" Sam Lucas's voice called.

"Yeah," Bob answered. "Who's with you? What's happened?"

"Helluva lot's done happened, Bob!" Sam Lucas replied, running toward his young chief. "They got every spankin' one o' our broncs. Some o' them stampeded the herd 'bout the time these up here chased our broncs off."

Several men trotted along after Sam Lucas. Bob waited for them to come up. A cold, paralysing chill deadened his whole body. His worst fears had been completely fulfilled. He was ruined. Dazedly that thought crashed into the centre of his mind. Herd stolen; horses run off; no way left to seek redress. Maybe some of his men killed. Then thought of Tom broke in above every other scrambled sensation. Tom! Had the hot-headed youngster——?

"What happened to the boys on night herd?" he demanded, his voice brittle with anxiety as he stepped forward to meet Lucas and grasp the hard-breathing man's shoulders. "Are they all safe?"

"All but Luke Brinkley, I guess," Sam's voice took on a reticent tone. "They shot him outa his saddle. The other men said they was surrounded so quick by a lotta tough bozos to each man, an' they bein' all separated around the herd, they had to give in or git kilt, certain sure. They had to give up their guns an' their broncs to them skunks."

A great sweep of relief cooled Bob's tautened nerves. If only Tom was safe it didn't matter much if he did have to give up his horse and lose the herd. He swallowed to wet his dry throat. For some reason he felt afraid to ask the question uppermost in his thoughts. He stared at the unrecognisable shapes of several men, heard the voices of some as they spoke to each other. If Tom had been among them he would have spoken by now.

"Where is Tom?" Bob asked Lucas, a tremor of growing fear in his speech.

"He ain't showed up yet," Sam Lucas confessed hesitantly. "He must've——"

"I heard shootin' over his way," Floppy Miller, one of the night herders came forward, interrupting Lucas, "jest when them devils riz up outa the ground all around me. Guess Tom put up a fight an' got away, or chased after the stampeders an' the herd."

"Musta been forty o' them devils, Bob," another one of the night herders declared. "We didn't have a crippled toad frog's chance agin 'em."

"I know," Bob admitted grimly. "You would've just been killed and still lost the herd. Was Brinkley wounded, or did they kill him?"

"Shot 'im plumb centre an' all through an' through," Miller replied to the question. "He tried swappin' lead with 'em, I guess."

"Where's his body?"

"Two o' the boys are out there guardin' it where he fell."

PADDY McILSHANE limped up to the group then, for he had been left behind as the other men ran after Lucas to meet Bob. The old lame ex-cowboy tried to explain how he had been surprised by the sudden attack on the remuda, but Bob, burdened with other and more urgent thoughts, shoved Paddy aside and strode toward the chuck-wagon. Walla Walla Wallace was slamming things about down there by the wagon, cursing in explosive outbursts about losing his wagon horses.

"Come on," Bob commanded. "Let's get a shovel and Luke's blanket."

He left some of the men digging a grave near the wagon and led the others on a silent march out to Luke Brinkley's body. They brought their dead comrade into camp wrapped in his bedding blanket. A half-hour later, with the flickering light of the campfire revealing many saddened faces, they lowered the body into the freshly-dug grave. Bob Fannin tried not to seem too hasty, but Tom had not yet returned. A leaden fear weighted him. He wanted to be away, looking for his brother. He stood at the head of Brinkley's grave, looking down at the black hole.

"Any o' you men know the Lord's Prayer?" he asked.

Several throats were cleared cautiously, but no one confessed to any such erudition. There was heavy silence.

"Well," Bob spoke again, "we all know Luke Brinkley was all man and died like a man, doing his best to the last. I hope nothing short o' that can ever be said about any man here. Cover it up."

They filled the hole and packed down the soil on top even with the adjoining ground, then brought a few shovels full of ashes, mixed with live coals, from the fire and spread over it as an added precaution to ward off snooping, scratching scavenger animals of the prairie. The coals and ashes killed the faint scent of the body in the ground.

When the work was finished all those present stood in a circle about the grave of Luke Brinkley and by common, wordless consent, every hat was removed and each head was bowed for a few silent moments. Then Bob Fannin broke the long tension as he turned away from the group, striding out into the darkness.

"I'll be back after a while," he told the

others. "Get some sleep and rest for your bones. You may need it, come tomorrow."

Sam Lucas started to offer his company to Bob, but something in the youth's steely tone and manner prohibited him. He kept silence while they listened to Fannin's receding footsteps until all sound of his going had ceased.

"Goshawmighty," Lucas exclaimed, "Bob's all tore up account o' Luke an' 'cause his kid brother ain't showed up."

"Bet he's gonna look for Tom," Floppy Miller added, "an' he might hafta look from here to Cherokee country 'fore he'd find that younker if Tom rid after them stampeders."

"Tom wouldn't 'a' gone fur all by hisself," Lucas declared. "He'd know he couldn't do nothin' single-handed. You know, an' I know, an' Bob Fannin knows somethin's happened to little ol' Happy Tom."

"Damn' if I wouldn't sure hate to be one o' them tickers," Orie Singleton put in, "if anything's happened to that button. I'd sure hate to have Bob Fannin totin' guns on my trail like he'll be doin' to them murderin' skunks."

"We oughta go 'long with Bob," Floppy Miller suggested. "He might run into trouble an' need us."

"Nonk-unh," Sam Lucas vetoed. "I thought o' that when he started off, but I know by the sound o' his whicker when that boy wants to gallop around by his lonesome. Leave 'im be. Let's do what he tol' us to do—git some snooze. That'll suit 'im more'n anything else we kin do. He'll be figgerin' on us chasin' them tickers soon's we git some broncs to straddle."

His segundo had figured it out correctly when he told the others that Bob Fannin would prefer being alone. There was such a slim chance that Tom could be found on that vast dark plain if he had been left out there, murdered by the slinking enemies, that Bob did not wish to impose on his trail mates by asking them to share his agonising anxiety and tiresome search. To Bob it would not be tiresome, not nearly so much so as remaining inactive in camp until daylight, for he certainly could not have slept.

He spent an hour trudging backward and forward, covering a half-mile swath over the sections at the south end of the bedding ground where he had left Tom on duty. If they had killed the boy in the first fury of the attack, his body would be somewhere in that sector. But his search was fruitless. He struck out following the softened, hoof-ploughed earth on the wide trail made by the stampeded herd, wandering back and forth across the churned soil, fearful that he would find the hoof-riddled body of his brother where he had been shot and left on the ground in the van of that wild, panic-stricken horde of cattle.

DURING another hour of this foot-blistering tramp in his high-heeled boots Bob's only discovery was the carcass of a cow that had probably broken a leg in a gopher hole and been trampled to death. He made that find when the quarrelling coyotes about the carcass drew him to it with a great fear chilling his blood.

From then on his ears were more keenly attuned to every sound on the endless, echoless prairie which seemed the least hint of coyotes' presence. Because of this whettened, keener sensitiveness to the dreaded howl and snarl of the hungry animals, Bob heard a tell-tale quarrel from far off, south of the herd's beaten track. He hurried in a bee-line for the spot whence came the sound, hoping and making himself believe that he would find another cow carcass.

As he drew nearer to the occasional sounds of the prairie denizens a snarling, raucous battle broke out between two or more of the vicious beasts. That meant that whatever was the prize for which they fought, it was something but recently discovered with the title of ownership still in dispute. Bob hastened his steps, an icy premonition gripping him. As he came in sight of the fighting shadows they scampered hastily away.

Something dimly visible upon the ground, that could be neither prairie plant, nor carcass of another herd animal killed in the stampede, drew Bob like a lodestone. Before he reached it, while still straining to make out its size and shape, he felt as if he had known all along that his brother's body was waiting out here for him.

Before he stopped above the motionless form he was fumbling for a match. He struck it and looked down at the pale face and open, staring, sightless eyes of Tom Fannin. He threw the match away and seized Tom's arms near the shoulders and lifted him to pillow his head and shoulders upon his own knees and lap. He ran a hand under the boy's shirt and felt for heart-beats, then felt with thumb and fingers against both jugular veins in the cold throat. There was not the least sign of life. The advancing chill of death was already too plainly in evidence.

Bob found two bullet wounds, caked with blood, one on the left side of Tom's head, the other under his left arm where the leaden missile had pierced his heart.

"Poor button," Bob murmured chokingly, "died fighting the sons o' Satan, throwing lead at 'em acrost saddle like an old hand at the game."

He found no trace of Tom's .45 and sadly guessed that the brave boy had dropped it when first hit by those killing bullets, but had probably remained in the saddle of his running pony for many long strides of the race before falling to the ground.

The loss of his herd and the murder of Luke Brinkley had been enough to set Bob Fannin grimly upon the tickers' trail. Now the fire of determination to collect full and complete retribution from the cowardly murderers of his brother burned into his being, blotting out everything else, blotting out even the consciousness of his profound grief that had at first assailed him.

He arose and lifted his brother's body across his shoulders, then struck off northward until he came again upon the churned, softened soil in the course of the stampeded herd. Along this he went, backtracking his own course over which he had come in his search. In less than a half-hour he reached camp and aroused his sleeping trail crew.

It was a little after midnight when the second simple funeral rites observed in the camp that night had been completed. All through the process of digging the grave, wrapping the body in blankets and laying it away in its last resting place, Bob Fannin spoke no word, nor showed his grief by sound or sign of any sort. He might have been assisting at the funeral of a total stranger. Only when the last clod of earth had been tamped firmly down he stood for a long time at the head of the grave with bared head. No spoken word escaped his lips. When he turned away toward the revived campfire his men followed him wordlessly. Their sympathy was none the less genuine for being unspoken.

Beside the fire the young trail boss gathered his men about him with a call in a strangely different, husky voice. He had always spoken, or sung to the herd or in camp with a clear, resonant voice. He spoke now with a cold, metallic click to his words, his voice as toneless as a large pillar of steel.

"It's prob'ly plumb crazy to think about chasin' them tickers," he told the assembled men. "We couldn't get enough Texas men bunched and on their trail 'fore they vent brands and scatter the herd, or sell it. If them official inspectors and lawmen the buyers have been promisin' to set up in Dodge City ain't ready yet to take care o' this sort o' thing, there's another way it'll have to be done.

"How much money have I won off you fellers on this trip?" he asked the cowboys. "How much did you lose to me, Sam? And you, Floppy?" and so on around to each one.

"You got me for jest fifteen iron wheels," Sam Lucas moaned. "You took my little roll of twenty-two bucks," Floppy Miller declared.

"Hell, you got me for a month's pay and forty dollars o' what's comin' to me

when the drive's finished," another cowboy who went by the name of Teeter complained.

While they wonderingly answered his questions Bob was unfolding a roll of paper money he had taken from under his shirt. They could not imagine what strange thing he purposed doing.

"Here you are, Sam," he handed Sam Lucas some bills, "there's your fifteen—and your twenty-two, Floppy—and the thirty easy dollars I took off you, Teeter, and never mind about the I O U, because this drive is a long ways from being finished."

HE overrode all objections from his astonished men and made them take back all the money which he had won from them around campfire poker games since the drive started. When he had paid off the last man, he rolled up the remainder of his money and put it back into the safety pocket where he carried it under his clothing.

"Now, boys," he went on in that same voice which they did not know, "it's *adios,* or *hasta la vista,* anyway. You boys and Walla Walla stay with the wagon until the next drive comes along. Then buy or beg enough horses to at least haul the wagon home. Go home and tell how we bogged down—tell 'em Bob Fannin failed on his first trail-rodding job. Lay it on heavy if you want to. I failed. But I'm gonna sign on another kind of job for a while. When I've finished—if there's anything left of me—I'll try to come back and face the music. So long, boys!"

Before the astounded group of ten cowboys could recover their wits, Bob Fannin was hurrying away into the thick darkness toward the swollen flood stream of the Cimarron.

"Hey, Bob, for the love o' Davy Crockett," Sam Lucas ran after him, "what's come over you? You cain't up an' leave us thisaway. Come back here."

The others followed Sam Lucas, but they all had to run to catch up with the hurrying, determined youth who had failed on his first great responsibility. At the edge of the silently, swiftly flowing current of the muddy, storm-fed river they overtook him. He was removing his top garments.

"You cain't do it, Bob!" Lucas wailed. "Man, it'd be plumb suicide! You cain't swim the Cimarron and it up to its bank tops!"

"If you trot downstream a ways and listen," Bob answered firmly, "I'll holler back from the other side pretty soon and show you."

He tied his shirt, pants and boots into a tight bundle, with gun and cartridge-belt on top, fixed the bundle on top of his head and let himself down over the slippery bank.

Amid groans of sorrow and deep misgivings, his trail mates hurried down along the line of the rushing torrent, listening for Bob Fannin's voice, but sadly certain that they would never hear it again. Many were the wails of regret that they had not seized him forcibly and prevented this foolhardy thing he had done. Not one of them stopped to reason that they could not have done that to Bob Fannin.

CHAPTER III

O' COURSE he's locoed," Sam Lucas howled in miserable acquiescence to his companions' chorus of suggestions. "Any man in his right mind woulda waited till we got some more broncs an' guns an' a took out after them devils. He's gonna try it alone."

"I'd a never thought Bob coulda gone daft like that," Stitt Owens added. "When it come to him full blast, what'd happened, he jest stood there over Tom's grave lookin' like a steer laid down to die. Say! I bet a month's pay that's jest what he's up an' done in this big, muddy ocean o' whirlpools. He jest didn't want us to know that he had a mind to drown hisself."

"Nonk-unh," Sam Lucas disagreed emphatically as they bunched there on the

dark river bank a long distance below where Bob Fannin had entered the deadly, swirling waters. "Naw, that big boy ain't the quittin' kind. He may've gone loco for a spell, but he's hell bent for action o' some sort an' he don't stand 'round holdin' his head, a-moanin'. If he'd 'a' meant to drown hisself he'd a give us the rest o' his dinero. He had several hundred simoleons tucked away under his shirt.

"Come on—le's mosey back to Walla Walla. Soon's I get some horsehide 'tween my laigs I'm takin' out to find that boy. He cain't shuck me outa this scrap so easy."

"But we ain't heard his holler yet, Sam," Floppy Miller objected. "He ain't made it acrost, or we'd a heard him like he promised."

"That big crick is so powerful fast an' wide here below the ford," Lucas countered, "that it prob'ly took him two-three miles down 'fore he could pull to the fur bank. Come on."

The others trudged along after Sam Lucas, walking with the peculiar, bow-legged, painful short strides of the cowboy. Unaccustomed to walking long distances in the tight, high-heeled boots they wore, the muddy course they had already covered this night had begun to pinch woefully. Most of them were fully convinced that Bob Fannin had drowned, whether intentionally or not, and that added to their misery. Many were the mingled curses heaped upon the tickers and pinching boots alike.

To a certain degree Sam Lucas had figured correctly. Bob Fannin was swept downstream swiftly, but not just two or three miles.

Soon after he swam out easily into the angry, rushing torrent, going carefully to hold his bundle-laden head above the waters and keep his top clothes dry, a whirlpool seized him with a seductive, powerful embrace and pulled him down into its vortex. With quick, frenzied strokes, driven by a desperate urge to live, he pulled out of the whirlpool's sucking core and struggled back to the surface.

His big bundle of clothes and boots, now very nearly soaked through, weighted him terribly, but with all his long, powerful body under water, he found it no great difficulty to keep his face above the surface. He knew that once clear of the south bank's influence, he would be free of whirlpool danger until a short distance from the north shore line.

Feeling only the strong, straight course of the current pulling him downstream, he began to stroke rhythmically toward the north shore. He was shortly out of sight of the scattered trees marking the south rim of the river. It was too dark to see any indications of the north bank. His only means of orientation was the direction of the swift current. He kept the down-rush of this against his left shoulder and side, cutting across it. It was soon evident to him that his friends on shore were being left so far behind he could never make them hear his loudest shouts.

After long minutes of struggling against the might of the gigantic, swiftly crawling serpent that was the stream, he ceased to pull and merely exerted himself enough to keep afloat. Paddling thus, lazily, but always with his course pointing toward the north bank, he swept along on the crest. Sooner or later the cross-currents would work him over closer to his destination.

He was well rested and thinking of again exerting himself in his course when something splashed the waters and loomed up darkly before him. The sudden apparition startled him as if it had been an alligator or shark, such as he had heard of in his own southern waters. But the thing bobbed up and down in the waters and kept pace downstream with him as he ceased swimming and floated down parallel to it. Then he recognised the long, shadowy thing and reached out to catch hold.

It was a log, the trunk of a tree that had been long enough dead to be dry and only this day swept into the flood, therefore it was not yet waterlogged. Grate-

fully Bob Fannin pulled himself half up on the crude float and began to stroke with his feet and legs to shove the log toward the left-hand bank of the Cimarron.

When the north shore line began to emerge out of the darkness he had no way of guessing the distance he had come down-stream, nor could he imagine how much farther down toward the Indian Nations country he would yet go before again touching solid ground.

He was worried by sight of heavy timber, for he realised that if the north shore was low, the water would be swirling among the tree-trunks and make it dangerous for him. Then he was swept into a long bend of the river, where the latter turned southward.

The log he hugged raced rapidly and began to turn broadside to the stream, dancing on the turbulent flood of the bend. Before he had time to watch his approach, Bob suddenly found himself within twenty feet of the bulking shadow of the bank. He could see the jutting tops of bushes in the edge of the water, then the log was suddenly whirled around, end for end. The heavier portion of it was sucked down quickly as if by a vicious, mighty force that seemed bent upon his destruction.

HE held on and was half lifted out of the water and flung across the surface in the direction of the bushes. His head struck something else hard that was dancing about the edge of the great suck-hole and for a second or two he was dazed and blinded. Then he turned his log loose and grasped desperately at the object against which he had been flung. This was another tree-trunk, but it was merely moving up and down in the water without going along with the swirling current.

Bob pulled himself along the log, going toward the dancing bushes he could now plainly see. In a moment he realised with a thrill that the other end of the log was fixed firmly by some means into the bank. Hurriedly now, for fear that the log would be torn from its mooring, he jerked himself along, scratching his skin painfully on protruding knobs and limbs, hooking other limbs into his bundle, nearly tearing this from his head.

With a tremendous sensation of relief, he seized a bush and felt himself in practically dead water. His feet touched ground when he let them down exploringly. He pulled himself along from one bush to another, once more entangling his bundle of clothing with the brush of limbs, jerking the bundle awry. He straightened it and climbed quickly out upon solid ground, safely above the gurgling, swishing big suck-hole which had so nearly claimed him.

After a few minutes he had wrung out his wet clothing and began to dress. When he started to buckle on his belt and holster he made the terrible discovery that his .45 had slipped from the holster. It was no doubt now at the bottom of the river. He felt as if he had lost his right arm, but then comforted himself in the belief he could reach Dodge City before he would need a gun. Once there he could buy a new one.

He headed upstream toward the heavy growth of large timber he had recently observed. Among the trees he hoped to find means of building a fire and drying his clothes. In a buttoned flap-pocket of his blue woollen shirt he had his brass shell matchbox. Over the open end of this empty shell he had fitted the filed-off end of another similar shell. The tightly fitted shells were kept greased with suet so that water would not reach the matches even if the container were left in water for hours.

He estimated that he was near the boundary between Kansas and the Indian country. To the north he would find ranches or squatters, for the long trail up from Texas had been shoved westward

on account of the westward creep of privately owned domain. He did not expect to find any habitation of white men this close to the boundary line and it was therefore a great surprise to him when he topped a small ridge and saw a yellow glow of lamplight revealing the square shape of a window.

As he went cautiously nearer, the whinny of a horse came as a very welcome sound to his ears. Another horse whickered gently, mildly curious about the noise the first one made. Bob hear someone moving suddenly inside the cabin which he could now clearly distinguish. The light was blown out and immediately there came the creak of a door being opened.

He stopped near the corner of the cabin, leaning against a tree which hid him. Unarmed, it was a risky adventure to come upon strangers who blew out their lights at the warning whinny of a horse.

"Who's out there?" a man's gruff voice demanded accusingly.

Bob could not keep silence and run the risk of being later discovered, although he distinctly did not like his challenger's voice. But, at least, the man was white and lived in some apparent semblance of civilised manner. Then he heard another voice within the cabin murmuring to the man at the door. Quickly he made up his mind and replied before a too suspiciously long delay.

"I'm a cowpoke that's lost his horse in the river," Bob explained. "Could you slab off a bit o' hospitality to a friendly stranger?"

"You all alone?" the voice asked suspiciously.

"Teetotally and absolutely," Bob declared.

"Come on in, then, stranger," the man invited without the least tinge of friendly welcome to his voice. "Light the lantern again, Stokey," he commanded back of him.

Bob went up to the front door as a lantern flared alight inside. He who had been in the doorway was now standing aside in the corner of the small cabin to the right of the door. Bob stepped over the door sill and saw that the cabin was not floored except by the bare, hard ground. The man beside the door was tall and lean. A glittering pair of black eyes beamed from above a face nearly smothered in a bushy black beard and long moustache. The other man beyond the lantern wore as heavy a beard, but it was red as was his hair. Each man wore guns and belts of cartridges. Other belts of cartridges and gun-filled holsters hung on the walls. This seemed to be a regular armoury.

"Thank you, gents," Bob said. "I was in a big hurry to hit Dodge City and tried to swim my bronc acrost the Cimarron. Guess he was a bit fagged out. Anyway, I lost him and just managed to drag myself out a little ways below here."

"You look wetted down, all right," the man by the door agreed and held out his hand. "Link Spurlock is my name, pardner. That's Stoky Morrison over there."

BOB shook hands with the two men and introduced himself as "Bob Shumway." He quickly figured that it would be just as well to hide his identity with these men.

"You talk like a Texano from way down south, pardner," the one calling himself Spurlock asserted. "Ain't you ridin' with none o' these herds comin' up the trail?"

"Nope," Bob lied quickly, with complete indifference. "I got my walking papers from the Shaftel ranch down under San 'Tone not long ago and as a pardner o' mine's been writing about good jobs and better wages up north, I decided to give the snow country a chance to frost-bite me."

There was no change of expression in the two bearded faces as Bob made this explanation with a forced smile in his grey eyes. Instinctively Bob felt that they were sizing him up, noting his clothes, which, in spite of their recent wetting, showed that he was not a slouchy dresser.

Spurlock seemed to be the boss of the pair. He now spoke:

"Well, you can chuck up the fire in the fireplace there and dry out here for the night. There's a pot o' beans over there seasoned with antelope meat. I guess you'll be wantin' to travel on to Dodge to-morrow?"

"Yeah, I'll sure have to get along," the youth told him.

Bob glanced around the room. Embers of a recent fire glowed on the rude mud hearth. The narrow, one-man bunks stood, one above the other, against the wall back of the door and four more were against the back wall. He cast one longing look at a loaded gun hanging on the wall almost within reach.

The young Texan had no desire to sleep here with these two hard-looking men hovering over him, not after the close manner in which they had judged his "get-up." The next remark decided him firmly against staying.

"Didn't you save nothin' but jest your clothes, Bob?" Spurlock asked, purring.

Bob did some quick thinking. He could not go on to-night afoot if there was any possibility of avoiding that dreaded way out and if he remained here to sleep, these men seemed fully capable of making an investigation of his possessions while he slept. They would then find his cache of money. This all flashed through his mind and he made his answer without noticeable delay.

"I managed to save what I wore, all except my gun," he said. "It washed outa my holster. I've got a measly few dollars that I was gonna live on till I lassoed me a job, but I'd sure be much obliged to you fellers if you've got an extra bronc you could spare me, providin' I've got enough to pay your price."

"What could you pay?" the red-headed Stokey Morrison got ahead of Spurlock in asking. He had a give-away tenseness about him.

"I could scrape out maybe fifty dollars for a good mustang," Bob admitted. He tried to look very innocent. If he could make these men believe him very dumb and a greenhorn he could more easily outwit them in their overconfidence.

He saw Spurlock's right hand fingering the big black handle of his gun. There was a look of appraising calculation in the manner with which the black-bearded fellow studied Bob.

With his heart in his throat, young Fannin decided to carry his pretension of innocent naïveté a daring step farther. He had to do it quickly for he was certain that both men before him were right then making up their minds to see if he had more than the admitted fifty dollars on himself. From the moment he had stepped across the threshold he was certain that these were human hawks who killed and picked their victims of their possessions as the real hawk picks his victims' bones of flesh.

His eyes turned to glance over the guns hanging on the wall. There was a good simulation of stupidity in his expression as he took one step, reaching his hand for the .45 in the cylinder of which he had already beheld the businesslike presence of cartridge-heads.

"And I'd be sure proud if you'd sell me a gun like this'n," he said. "I could scrape out another twenty-five——"

"Leave that gun alone!" Spurlock shouted angrily. "We ain't sellin' no guns! Put it back!"

"Damn' if he ain't dumb!" Stokey Morrison added in with his partner's fuming words.

Fannin had the gun in hand already before Spurlock had time to finish his warning.

"I ain't a-gonna hurt it, mister," the youth declaimed in his stupidest vein, hefting the gun with such clumsiness that his hosts were sure he had never handled one before.

By a flicking side glance Bob saw the drawn gun wavering in Spurlock's hand. The killer was going through the process of working himself into a murder fury. The young trail boss has seen that sort of thing before and recognised the plain signs. He half turned, playing the big .45 up and down with his hand, the muzzle in the general direction of the two bearded men.

"Hell, Link, give it to 'im!" Stokey Morrison advised in a low voice as if he believed Bob Fannin too dumbly unconscious to hear.

Bob saw the big thumb on Spurlock's right hand slip over the hammer of his gun. The interim of play-acting had come to a finish. Like a flash of lightning the two older men saw an incredible transformation. The dumb, clumsy boy changed instantly into a tensed, clear-eyed fighting man. The gun in his hand, which had been dawdled so awkwardly a bare second before, steadied now as the youth bent his tall form and stepped sideways. A spurt of yellow flame came from the gaping bore of the gun and the roar of the explosion shook the small cabin, seemed to lift the low roof.

CHAPTER IV

STAND as you are, gents!" the firm, chilly voice of Bob Fannin commanded the two amazed men before him.

Link Spurlock staggered back grasping his right hand with his left. The bullet from Fannin's commandeered gun had smashed the threatening gun from his grip. Blood began dripping from his wrist where a slither of lead or steel from the glancing impact of the bullet had torn through flesh.

"I don't know why you got this way," Bob went on, looking the two calmly in the eyes, "but I sure reco'nised the signs o' murder in your ugly faces when you heard I had money on me. Turn your back to me, Morrison, and shuck that belt and gun—drop 'em to the ground back o' you."

Sullenly, slowly, Morrison turned and began fumbling at his belt buckle. Spurlock stood there glaring at the changed young Texan, squeezing his right wrist, showing pain and boiling rage in his close-set, glittering black eyes and the quiver of snarling lips under the cloak of moustache and beard. Bob's gun still covered the two from an easy stance at hip as his eyes kept close watch on both men.

At last Morrison unbuckled his belt and dropped it, with his gun-filled holster, just back of him. Neither he nor Spurlock had spoken a word, or uttered a sound since their yells of surprise at the shot which had disarmed Spurlock. Their eyes merely glowered their hatred now in continued sullen silence.

"Step back, both o' you," Bob commanded, "back into that corner there—and you'd sure better not try jumping out that door. Lead could jump a lot faster after you."

"What you gonna do to us?" Stokey Morrison blubbered. He was showing fear.

"There, that'll do," Bob said as the two huddled into the corner of the cabin. "Now, Morrison, take that handkerchief from 'round your neck and tie up that bleeding arm o' your pardner's."

An expression of relief came over the visible part of Morrison's face. He snached the bandanna from around his neck and quickly bound up Spurlock's bleeding forearm.

"Now pitch out that bunch o' rope from the corner there," Bob ordered. "Drop it here at my feet."

Morrison grudgingly did as directed. Bob stooped, without removing eyes or menacing gun from bearing upon his two captives, and untangled the bunch of lariat rope, then tested its strength with left hand and a booted foot, placing the latter on the rope while he jerked and pulled at the lariat.

"That'll do, I guess," he commented and tossed the rope back to Morrison. "Lie down on that first bunk there, Spurlock. Lie on your left side, hands behind your back, and face the wall."

For a few minutes Bob Fannin directed the more fearful Morrison in tying up Spurlock very securely. He frequently had to direct the trembling man how to tie the knots tighter, or draw a few more windings about Spurlock's legs.

The youth knew that he could control

Morrison better for his immediate purposes than he could the more fearless and thoroughly enraged Spurlock. Judging by the number of bunks and other signs about the place, he surmised that there were other members of the gang to which Spurlock and Morrison belonged. When they would return he could not guess, of course, but he was aware of the danger he faced and determined to move fast.

Morrison was next forced to put all the guns, belts and ammunition into a big canvas sack which lay stuffed with grass in one of the bunks, used as a pillow. Bob strapped on Morrison's gun and belt over his own, thus again becoming a two-gunner. From now on men might look askance at his two guns, but for the duration of his task his wearing of two guns would not be for show and bravado.

"Take the lantern and lead out to that corral o' broncs I heard 'while ago," Bob ordered Morrison, "and tote that bag o' guns along."

The red-head slung the heavy bag over his shoulder with a grunt and picked up the lantern. Until then Spurlock had remained sullenly speechless. Now he spoke as he realised what Bob planned to do.

"Robbery at the point o' gun is bad medicine in this country, feller," he growled from his helpless position on the bunk, "but stealin' horses means the rope if the big boss gits you—an' you kin be damn' sure he'll git you."

"I'm not stealing a horse from you, Spurlock," Bob replied. "When I leave here I'll carry a bill of sale written by your sweet-faced pal here and he'll have the fifty dollars that you both agreed was a fair price for a bronc. And I'll drop your bag o' guns up the trail a ways where you can find 'em later, though you don't deserve that much since you meant to murder me."

"I don't guess you ever heard tell o' Buffalo Judson?" Spurlock asked as Bob started to motion Morrison toward the door.

Bob Fannin stopped and straightened stiffly, staring toward Spurlock. He did not answer at once, but seemed to be making an effort to control the surprise which the bound man's words had caused.

"Yeah," he said finally with deceptive anxiety in his tone. "I've heard o' Buffalo Judson. He's a big man 'round this country they say. What's he to you fellers?"

"Nothin' but our big boss I was tellin' you about," Spurlock told him gloatingly. "He ain't a bit easy on young upstarts like you, Shumway. You better pay double for the horse an' guns you take an' let me loose right now, too, or Judson'll git you sure's you stay top side o' ground."

"That's the plumb interestingest thing I ever heard in all my life," Fannin answered, a vibrant note of enthusiasm ringing in his words. "And my name ain't Shumway. It's Bob Fannin, trail boss o' the herd and horse cavvy Buffalo Judson just stole to-night acrost the Cimarron yonder. I'm sure much obliged to your telling me, Spurlock. It makes a big change in my plans real downright necessary. Go on, Morrison! Let's see how many broncs and saddles you got out there."

He drove Morrison ahead with his burden of gun-filled sack and lantern. They went out the door and turned left toward the place where Bob had heard horses whinneying when he approached the lighted cabin. At a big swinging pole gate to the corral, Morrison put the sack on the ground and opened the gate, followed by Bob.

They went across toward a long shed at the north side of the corral. Bob could see a large herd of ponies packed closely at the far side of the corral, eyes staring toward the lantern light. Under the shed, on pegs and poles, there were thirty or forty saddles and bridles of various makes, from the commonest, cheapest

kind to the most elaborate, silver-spangled Mexican and Texas patterns. Bob was sure that these represented the gleanings from raids on trail herd crews. There were plenty of lariat ropes tied to the saddles, or hanging separately.

For the next thirty minutes, closely supervised by the watchful young Texan with gun in hand, Stokey Morrison was busy catching and saddling the best-looking members of the large bunch of cow ponies. There were ten men of his stranded crew who would need at least one riding pony each with which to return home. Four more could pull Walla Walla's chuck-wagon. Even at that they would have to stop for long rest periods on the wearisome trip southward. But Bob could not risk leading more than the fourteen best-looking ones he selected from the herd of thirty-five or forty animals in the corral. He had Morrison string them out, a lariat from the horn of the saddle in front back to the neck of the next horse behind. He chose a long-bodied black gelding for himself and made the fear-driven Morrison saddle him with a plain but strongly built and fairly new steel-horned saddle.

When his string of saddle ponies were in readiness for his departure he had Morrison open the gate and drive all the rest of the pony herd out into the open. They kicked up their heels, squealed and bit at each other in their rush through the gate, quickly disappearing into the night toward the rain-soaked prairie.

Morrison stood inside the gate glumly watching the hasty, thunderous exit of the horses. Bob remained just back of him and watched the scene with grim satisfaction. He knew that all those horses were stolen and he was glad to deprive the arch thief and murderer, Buffalo Judson, of the chance to drive them off and sell them elsewhere. In most of the herd he recognised the south-west Texas mustang markings and knew that trail crews had been raided for them just as his camp had been.

As the last of the loose herd clattered away into the darkness, Bob directed Morrison to tie the sack of guns and belts on top of the saddle of the horse immediately behind his own mount. Morrison was so full of pent-up rage by this time that he was ready to forget his fear of the ever-ready gun in the youth's hand.

"Boy," he growled between grunts of exertion with the sack, "I'd shore'n hell hate to be in your tracks, buckin' Buffalo Judson thisaway. He ain't no common cow rustler. He's gonna keep Texas cow ticks outa Kansas an' keep out Texas cowboys, too. You dassent go into Dodge City. Soon's they see you're from Texas, they'll fill you full o' lead or send you hellin' straight back to Texas an' damn' glad to go."

"Since when's Buffalo Judson laying down the law to Texas cowmen, or telling them to stay outa Dodge City?" Bob asked contemptuously.

"You'll hear plenty, an' better'n I kin tell you if you go on into Dodge. Jest go on. Don't take my word for it."

"That's exactly what I'm heading for right now," Bob told him. "And you'll do me a heap big favour if you'll send Judson right hot on my trail soon's he shows up. Will he come here 'fore he hits for Dodge?" he asked suddenly, wondering if he would need to go to Dodge City at all.

"Naw. He'll be havin' plenty business in Dodge right soon, 'specially with you there."

Morrison finished the tying of the last rope around the sack and saddle at Bob's orders and turned to stare unbelievingly at the calm, tall youth. He was about to say something else, but Bob was anxious to be away. It was not long until daylight and he was afraid that Judson would be sending his own trail remuda over to this horse camp by morning.

"Get into the hut with your pal," he ordered the cringing man. "I've got to bid you two hospitable bozos good-bye real pronto."

He drove Morrison into the cabin and tied the angrily protesting fellow up on a bunk adjoining the one occupied by Spurlock. He found that the latter had

succeeded in loosening some of his thongs. While he retightened these Spurlock cursed and raged, mouthing vile threats, making dire prophesies as to what was sure to happen to Fannin. His frothy rage was rather awesome when Morrison told him all that had been done.

"We'll git you, you damn' young squirt!" he promised Bob. "Jest as sure's you're livin' we'll git you!"

"Listen, feller," Bob grated in his ear, jerking a cord tight on Spurlock's wrists, "I looked close at your legs and at all them horses. I know you two didn't swim the Cimarron to-night. If I had the least suspicion you two sidewinders was with them murdering devils that killed my kid brother and another man last night, I'd fill your carcasses with lead right now. But just the same, I hope you two follow me. If you play in with that snake, Judson, I'd a lot rather you'd all come along to the settlement, for setttlement it's sure gonna be 'tween that sneaking polecat and me. Just tell him that, 'cause I don't want to waste no time explaining things when I find him."

"Find 'im!" Spurlock exploded and laughed a short, mirthless guffaw, pretending to be greatly amused. "Find Buffalo Judson? Boy, you ain't foolin' nobody with that hot boastin'. You'll be runnin' so fast to keep outa Buffalo's sight, you'll burn the green grass a mile wide acrost the country you cover!"

"All right," Bob told the two furious prisoners. "I'm going now. You two can roll outa your bunks and get back to back to untie them ropes after a spell. By that time I'll be safe on my way and hoping you'll follow. *Hasta la vista, gallinazos!*"

HE blew out the flame of the lantern and took the latter out the door with him. There he threw it far out among the brush in front of the cabin. With sounds of the two men's cursing and raving in his ears, he hastened to his saddle horse at the head of his impatient string of ponies. A few seconds later he was devoting every faculty to the job of getting that awkward line of wily mustangs straightened out in an obedient string toward the praria.

The heavy clouds had broken back in large spots overhead, opening big windows to the sky through which helpful starlight spilled. A moon was somewhere behind the clouds, too, and its reflected glow aided in revealing ground objects. The anxious youth found the trail leading away northward from the horse thieves' corral and ten minutes later led his strange cavalcade up through the broken bluffs bordering the river bottoms.

Somewhere in the west, upstream, was the wide fording place of the river, where tens of thousands of Texas cattle had been driven across on the way to market. Not far from the south side of that ford Sam Lucas and the other men would be sitting about their camp-fire, or rolled asleep in their blankets. Bob estimated that the river's swift torrent had swept him eight or ten miles east of the ford. He figured that it was probably two hours until daylight. With good luck it should be possible to reach the trail crossing of the Cimarron by the coming of dawn or before.

Several times he had to speak sharply to various members of his long string of saddled ponies. From time to time an impatient animal would bite at the rump of his predecessor. Such warlike challenges always brought on squeals and wild kickings, disrupting the peaceful progress of things considerably until Bob Fannin's voice and copious use of practical cowboy profanity—the only human language understood by cow horses—brought temporary truce.

Whenever one of these petty altercations broke out, Bob urged his own lead mount into more speed while he shouted his quieting commands back the fighters. As the connecting ropes tautened and jerked on the necks of the ill-tempered ones, they forgot their animosities in the more immediate desire to ease the painful pull on their windpipes. Thus the youth

prevented a serious tangle and possible disaster to his buoyant hopes of helping his stranded friends.

At about half the distance Bob estimated that he must go to reach the Chisholm Trail ford, he came to the swollen flood of a large creek tributary of the Cimarron which came down from the north-east. He turned off up the course of this until a wide, fordable place was reached some two miles from its junction with the Cimarron. The moon was out in a nearly clear sky now. He knew that if he could not ford this lesser stream with his difficult string of ponies, it would be useless to try the larger Cimarron, even at the Trail ford. With the idea that this would be a testing rehearsal for his larger task, he plunged into the current, calling encouragingly to the snorting, unwilling animals behind him.

Only for a short distance in the middle of the flood stream was it necessary to swim the animals. He ran into real difficulty though, after reaching solid ground in water waist-high to the ponies. Low brush, half-submerged in the overflowing waters, threatened for a while to get his saddled horses into a dangerous tangle. The stirrup of one saddle evidently caught in a bush and caused the pony bearing that saddle to struggle, lose his footing and plunge nearly out of sight in the water. This frightened his nearest mates.

Bob avoided more serious catastrophe by quickly changing his course and urging his lead pony up against the current instead of directly forward into more brush tangle. In this direction he saw no brush tops in the moonlight. The following horses soon became free of the bushes and within a hundred yards the youth found a way clear of trees and brush by which he rode out upon the prairie.

Elated by his success, he kept the lead ropes stretched from then on, for his mind had not been idle as to his immediate future actions. It was quite possible that Buffalo Judson might have returned to the camp with murderous intentions after getting the herd well on its way and finding one of his men missing. Bob was anxious for his friends' safety. He evolved a plan to cross the ford at once with his herd of saddled ponies. By taking three across first, he and three of the cowboys could then return and easily lead the remainder through the heavy current.

He reached the much worn trail across the river from the crew's camp just at the first glow of dawn light. The cold air of the early morning hours had begun to chill him in his still damp clothing in spite of his continuous exertions. It was therefore a doubly welcome sight when he saw a camp-fire a few hundred yards north of the crossing, back from the river.

The two chuckwagons were drawn up close together. Bob Fannin saw light reflected from the canvas tops of these good omens before he got close enough to see the flames of the fire. He felt like shouting for joy, because it meant that trail crews were returning from their drives and had come during the night to the river barrier, there to await coming of daylight. His surmise proved true. Coming close to the camp-fire he perceived a number of men sitting or standing, huddled together about the fire, waiting for their breakfast.

At sound of his noisy approach the men scattered away from the fire, some going to the wagons, others disappearing behind nearby trees.

"Hunh," Bob Fannin grunted his surprise, "they're sure skittish about strangers which means they know there's two-legged lobos around."

CHAPTER V

WHEN young Fannin had led his ponies a little nearer he stopped, he could be clearly seen and greeted the early risers.

"Howdy, folks," he called in the time-honoured south Texas salute. "Anybody here from the live-oak country?"

"Guess there might be, stranger," a dubious voice replied from the shadow of the wagons. "Who are you fellers an' what you want?"

"Me," Bob answered. "I'm just one, though I've got a few extra broncs here. Isn't part of this outfit the Crosson trail crew?"

"Yeah, part of it," the answer confirmed. "Where's your crew an' herd, Bob Fannin. I'm Jim Crosson."

With those words, Jim Crosson came from behind the wagon and approached Bob. He was a big, brawny man, over six feet tall, the second of the three Crosson brothers who had built up within a few years one of the largest ranch spreads in south-west Texas.

"Didn't think you'd be getting along this far on the back trail so soon, Jim," Bob explained. "Buffalo Judson and a pack of his tick hunting rustlers jumped us last night. Grabbed our saddle stock, leaving us afoot, and run off our herd. They throwed plenty o' lead around and killed my brother, Tom, and Luke Brinkley. We buried the two o' them over there last night." He nodded toward the river's farther shore.

"That's hell clean down to the devil's scorched hoofs!" Jim Crosson declaimed vigorously. "Git down, Bob, an' tell us all about it. We're jest about to throw some breakfuss under our belts. Come an' join in."

As yet the pangs of hunger had not superseded the other driving emotions of grief and hatred in Bob Fannin. He did not crave food, but in spite of the lukewarmness in Jim Crosson's manner which his sensitive ears and eyes perceived at once, he still nursed a faint hope that here were many men who would join his own crew in striking back at a common enemy. He swung out of the saddle as a great many more men gathered around him and his unusual collection of horses.

In addition to the Crosson trail crew of ten men and cook, there was a mixed crew from a number of ranches in the Brazos Valley that had joined forces to the number of fifteen cowboys and delivered eight thousand head of cattle to the railroad. Bascom Holter, who had bossed this latter trail drive, had gone on east with his train loads of cattle, leaving his crew to return without him to Texas, or scatter to the four points of the compass as such trail riders often did.

In their home territories there was no great warmth of friendship between cowmen of the Brazos grasslands and those of the more southerly live-oak country. Bob Fannin remembered this as soon as he learned who were the others camping there with the Crosson outfit. His heart sank lower.

He stood beside the warming fire, drying his damp clothing, and told the full story with more than twenty men gathered around him. The two camp cooks busied themselves with making breakfast. There were many exclamations of deep feeling against the ticker raiders and awkward expressions of sympathy over the two men who had been murdered. There were two or three half-hearted declarations from individual cowboys that "somethin' oughta be done about it," but the voluntary offer of actual aid in recovering the lost herd and punishing the raiders which Bob had hoped for was not forthcoming.

He knew that Jim Crosson's men would await their chief's lead in such an offer, but without means of hiring the Brazos Valley men and paying them high wages to risk their lives, Bob was not foolish enough to believe he would get their services.

Breakfast was eaten, Bob forcing himself to eat much more food than his appetite called for and he drank three cups of the hot, black coffee offered him. He was beginning to formulate a plan which made it necessary to fortify himself as much as possible against a long, trying test of his stamina. Rather, it was a reversion to the first wild, somewhat nebulous plan which had urged him on his way the previous night. He was finally led to a definite decision by a declaration from Jim Crosson which he had felt in

the offing ever since Crosson had first greeted him.

"I've been thinkin' a lot, Bob," Crosson spoke his generous, copious advice, "ever since you come in. We've heard all corners o' your problem. Now, the thing to decide on is what's the big to-do that's gotta be done about it. O' course you cain't trail them rustlers an' tackle 'em in their own territory. We all know they're too well put up for a small bunch o' Texas men to do that. They done got ever'body up here all het up 'bout Texas tick fever, so you couldn't scrape a friend out've all Kansas.

"The only thing that I can see for you to do is to go back home an' put it up to the Gov'ment. They're promisin' official inspectors an' United States marshals out here right soon. Fact is, I heard in Dodge that some such gents is expected there right away in a few days. If you could go on into Dodge and put the case up to them Gov'ment gents when they come, you might git some action agin this Buffalo Judson an' his backers. But you cain't go to Dodge, so you'd better trail back——"

Bob Fannin had stood erect there with his back to the fire, watching Jim Crosson's face coolly, a smothering feeling of contempt rising in his heart against the big rancher. When Crosson said that he couldn't go on into Dodge City his wrath got the better of his natural reticence.

"Who the hell said I couldn't go on to Dodge?" he demanded hotly, interrupting Crosson's bland talk.

Crosson glanced up from where he squatted on his heels and looked his surprise at the unusual vehemence in the youth's voice.

"O' course you ain't had time to hear," he explained. "Dodge people say so many Texas men have been raisin' lively hell in their town lately an' killin' so many citizens that cowboys with the smell, or looks o' Texas on 'em jest ain't welcome no more. Fact is, Bob, they's a 'Not Welcome' sign out for all us Texas folks an' a warnin' to stay outa town. All trail crews are 'posed to camp out this side o' the river, an' not go in town a-tall. If they ketch a Texas cowboy in Dodge now wearin' guns, it's a hun'erd to one shot he'll git planted in Boot Hill. You wasn't aimin' to go on in, was you, Bob?"

BOB was on the verge of making a hot retort that would not have been complimentary to Jim Crosson, but snaffled his temper because there was at least one little favour he still could ask and expect to receive from the cautious cowman. He wanted his string of horses taken across to his stranded trail mates.

"I'm not going back home till I've seen this job finished," he told Crosson with restraint. "If your brother had been murdered by them devils, would you tuck tail, and hist yourself off on the south trail, begging the Government to maybe-so get something done to the murderers, giving old Judson and his stinking lobo bunch plenty time to scatter when they hear what's up? I guess your song would be different, Jim, if you was in my boots.

"Yes, I'm going on to Dodge City and I'm going in toting two guns where nobody can miss seeing 'em. I've got one favour to ask of you men. Will you take these fourteen broncs acrost the river to my friends over yonder this morning?"

"Sure, Bob," Crosson readily agreed, "if you're plumb set on committin' suicide a-goin' on into——"

"Okay, Jim. Thanks. Let me see if I can call some o' them fellers down to the other bank o' the river."

He walked away toward the edge of the river at the ford where it was nearly a quarter of a mile wide. It was several hundred yards to the water from the camp. Some of the cowboys sauntered along with him.

The top of Walla Walla Wallace's chuck-wagon could be seen in the first glinting rays of the sun which was breaking through the cloud banks on the eastern horizon. A slight rise in the ground beyond the river prevented one from seeing any men that might be stirring about the distant camp. Bob drew

his gun and fired three shots, spaced as a distress signal, then waited and talked with the men beside him.

Two Brazos cowboys, little older than he was, perhaps inspired by a love of adventure, volunteered to go back with him to Dodge City and help him. He told them that three Texans in Dodge City would be just three reasons instead of one for stirring up trouble; that what he planned to do could be done better alone.

He drew his .45 again and fired three more shots, aiming the bullets above Walla Walla's wagon top, hoping they would hold up that far and draw his men's attention should they not hear the sound of the shots. At that distance the bullets could not cause damage, even if they dropped right in the camp. A half-minute later, while Bob talked with the men beside him, or listened to their gratuitous advice, his gaze was rewarded by sight of Sam Lucas and several of the other men running down to the river edge beyond the stream.

As the men reached the river's edge and shouted questions, Bob stood out from the men with him and made himself known to his own crew and told them of the horses he was sending across to them. Again he advised them to go on back to Texas, that he was going to Dodge City.

"You wait over there for me, you high-topped young sonuvagun!" Sam Lucas shouted across the river when Bob finished. "I aim to go with you. You cain't go at them devils all alone!"

"It's not your fight, Sam," Bob called back. "You haven't lost anything. Go on back home and make a true report of just what's happened. That's gotta be done and I'm depending on you to do it. Besides, there's nothing I cain't do better alone."

"Yeah, you can go git kilt all alone!" Lucas shouted derisively. "You wait over there for me, or bring me a horse acrost here right now. I'm comin' after you, Bob, an' ain't no use in your talkin'."

Bob Fannin seemed about to continue the argument, but clenched his jaws and waved a parting signal to his late trail mates. Without another word or backward glance he returned to the Crosson camp with the cowboys accompanying him.

He didn't want to ride into Dodge City on a horse whose title of ownership would be in doubt, but when he looked at the magnificent black racer he had chosen from the horse thieves' herd and saw his good points in the clear light of the risen sun, he could not bring himself to part with the beautiful animal. At first he had thought of offering to buy a mount from Crosson. He discarded this idea when he approached his black gelding and heard the friendly whicker of welcome. That whicker won him. It proved that already the horse acknowledged him as his master.

The youth was bitter with disappointment and aflame with a desire to be on his way, clear of all ties behind, with only his single purpose ahead. From Crosson he secured the supplies he needed and rode away.

CHAPTER VI

It was late afternoon of the second day when a tall, straight-backed young Texan rode into Dodge City along a very muddy, boggy street. The long-barrelled, proudly stepping black gelding under him seemed unwearied by two days of travel. He and the youth astride him had come to an understanding. Two days of eating good oats given him by his new rider and the soft, drawling, masterful talk, won his thoroughbred heart of affection.

Bob turned into the first stable he came to along the muddy street, for he did not want to make too much display of his fine horse for the present. He must first

determine his status in the town and learn other things before taking up any arguments over a horse of doubtful ownership. He meant, however, to pursue every means within his power to acquire legitimate ownership of the great black.

One reason why he stopped at the Bodine Livery Stable was because of the crudely-painted sign in front, "Gentilled Horses For Sail or Swop." He had heard of Laz Bodine, who had a horse ranch out south of town. Perhaps the horse dealer would know something about his black gelding. He dismounted within the wide centre passage of the stable, between the stalls, and spoke to an old grey-bearded man who arose from a rickety chair in the doorway of the stable office.

"Howdy, mister," the youth greeted. "Is Mr. Bodine around?"

"Laz is out to the ranch, young feller," the old man answered, a twinkle of kindly interest in his eyes. Those eyes were frankly wide open and remarkably clear blue for one so obviously old.

"Do you, maybe, know anything about this, big beaut'?" Bob asked further waving a hand at his raven-coated horse.

The old man looked appraisingly at the black for some time before answering. It was plain that he knew and loved horses, for his expression was alight with admiration. He caught hold of the bridle reins gently, slipped his hands on to the velvety muzzle and lifted the glossy black lips to look at the firm, white teeth, then stood back two steps and gave his opinion.

"I know he's 'bout five year old," he said. "And with that big chest, long neck, legs and body he'll outrun most any other piece o' horseflesh for short or long pull. He's——"

"Pardon me, mister," Bob interrupted, "but I'm not asking for his points. Two days on his back is enough to show them to me. I wanted to know if you might make a guess as to his owner."

The old man turned his surprised glance quickly upon Bob then.

"You ain't his owner?" he asked in lowered tone, caution in his manner.

"I took 'im from a bunch o' horse thieves two nights back; took 'im because that same bunch o' thieving lobos had just swiped my trail cavvy. I want to find his rightful owner and buy 'im if I can. Until I do that, I'd like to make plenty record that I'm not the one what stole 'im."

"Long John will know. He's breakin' horses for Laz now."

"Long John, the Cherokee?" Bob asked a pleasurable light in his face.

"Yep. Know the big chief?"

"Some guntoters with more powder and lead than brains was trying to make Long John dance on the sidewalk in front o' Wright & Beverley's last year. Me and my pardner happened along just when them skunks was gonna pump lead at Long John's mocassins' cause he wouldn't dance. We told them to dance, but being's we was just two and they was about five, we had to swap lead. You hear about that?"

"Gee-willingers, younker!" the old man exclaimed, the twinkle in his eyes dancing more merrily now. "You must be Bob Fannin'! I've heard plenty about you from Long John and others. Since you planted three o' them devils in Boot Hill that day, you and other Texas cowboys have come to be right unpop'lar in Dodge City. Ain't you heard that they's order out agin lettin' Texas men come into town?"

"Heard something o' the sort," Bob admitted as he removed his big black hat and ran his slim fingers through his slate-coloured, glossy thatch of hair. He saw no sign of evil in the old man. "I got right urgent business in here, though, so I had to come. How can I go 'bout making that record on Midnight here?"

The black turned his head when Bob pronounced his name he had given him, showing that he already recognised his new master's call.

"If you go to the town marshal, Brule Garon," the old man informed, "he'll jest take up the critter and claim to hold 'im for his rightful owner. That'll be the last of it. Maybe Garon would claim right off that he's his horse."

"Garon?" Bob questioned musingly over the name's familiar sound. "Uh-huh, I remember. He's in cahoots with Buffalo Judson, ain't he?"

"Sh-h!" the greybeard cautioned and went on in a low voice as two men came up in front. "Them's two o' his lick-spittles. Din't ask that question no more 'round here, younker!" He spoke the warning vehemently, although in a hissing whisper.

"Hi, Barker—Hi, Short," he greeted the two men who walked in with muddy boots, kicking and slinging the mud.

"How yuh, Mr. Bodine?" the one the old man had addressed as Barker replied to the greeting, but Shorty remained silent, eyeing Bob Fannin and his black gelding. "Where's Laz?" Any Texas horse thieves blow in lately?"

BARKER gave Bob Fannin a short, meaningful glance as he spoke.

"Why d'you come askin' that question ever' time you see a new customer drop in on us, Barker?" the old man demanded, a note of irritation in his tone.

" 'Cause I figger that all new customers droppin' in from this direction," Barker explained as he glanced casually at Bob's San Antonio boots, "is from Texas an' most Texas gents ride in on stole broncs. Now, take that slick black there," he nodded at Bob's horse "a blind man could see he ain't no Texas mustang. Why'd a Texas cowpoke come a-ridin' into Dodge City on such a horse?"

The old man appeared embarrassed and fearful as glanced from Barker to the tight-lipped, expressionless face of Bob Fannin. He stepped back out of line between the two. The man Shorty stood to the right and back of Barker by a step, both hands lazing over his gun-belt.

"Nothing personal in that question, is it, Mr. Barker?" Bob asked very quietly. Both of his hands clung limply to his unbuttoned decorated buckskin vest.

Barker shot him a belligerent look.

"Ain't you the Texas longhorn that killed three men here last year?" he demanded.

"There's some who'd call 'em men," Bob admitted. "Maybe you would?"

Barker swelled an inch or two while he looked at Fannin's cool, loose stance and the position of his slender hands. He had heard how this young Texas cowboy could start from that very innocent-looking position and snake the two guns at his hips so quickly the human eye couldn't follow the movement. At least that was public rumour and Barker didn't wish to experiment, not even with Shorty backing him up.

"All right," he finally said. "Me an' Shorty, here, are part of a vigilante committee appointed by Marshal Garon to keep you wild Texas gun artists outa Dodge. If you got strict business to 'tend to in town, come in 'out'n your guns, 'tend to your business an' then make yourself scarce damn' quick. Is that plain?"

"Mighty plain, mister," Bob replied, ice caking his words. "Plain as cow corral mud and a whole lot nastier. What if my urgent business in Dodge needs a few dots on the i's and periods that only lead can make?"

"We jest fenced in a lot more ground in Boot Hill graveyard," Barker declared. "There's lotsa room for you out there now."

"It'd be right selfish for Texas men to take up ground that belongs to you fellers," was the cool rejoinder.

For a few doubtful seconds Bob Fannin waited, his dark grey eyes watching the two men before him, reading the emotions back of their smoky eyes as if they were an open book.

He didn't want to draw guns with them here, but he had deliberately baited and bluffed them for a purpose. He would prefer that they return to the centre of town and spread the word that he was here with guns ready to back his rights and just as ready to be let alone.

"All right," Barker finally blurted out, as if he had held his breath a long time, we'll be ramblin' back up town. Better shuck them guns 'fore you slope around

town, Texas. S'long, Mr. Bodine."

He turned and walked away, followed by Shorty. Both went without looking back, but with quick, purposeful steps. Bob looked at the old man, a queer, tight smile on his lips. The old man's cheeks, that had been ruddy above his grey beard a while before, were pale now; fright shone in his eyes.

"I'm right afeared for you, son," the old fellow declared anxiously. "My son Laz, and me try to be friends with ever'-body, but there's some I don't like and some I like right off. I'd hate to see you run into that den o' snakes in town, son.

"They ain't much law in Dodge, but a lot o' the better people been wantin' a law enforcer and they're jest waitin' till some faster gunfanner than Garon comes 'long to tangle horns with him, then they aim to bring in a real impartial law man. They's talk o' them gettin' Bat Masterson to come in from his buffalo huntin' camp over on the Medicine Lodge."

"Well, I've got to round up certain o' them snakes," Bob told him. "I cain't wait for the law to come in. If this man Garon is marshal here, he's mixed up with a lawless gang headed by a man named Buffalo Judson. I've got to collect a mighty big debt from Judson."

He told the old stableman of how he had lost his herd and his brother and what the dying member of the raiding band had half spoken concerning Buffalo Judson and Garon.

"Yep," the elder Bodine agreed. "That's Judson's line, but Brule Garon is the brains and protector back o' Judson's big crew. They're runnin' pretty high right now 'cause they know reg'lar inspectors and lawmen'll soon be in here crimpin' their game. You ketch 'em jest when they're at their worst and wildest. Hadn't you better wait till they get in real law here, son?"

"I'd like a whole lot more to be helping to bring in the law," Bob spoke, again grim and hard of jaw. "When will Long John be around here?"

"He'll roll in his blanket up in the hayloft pretty early to-night, 'cause he's jest come in from a hard spell o' breakin' a wild bunch for Laz."

"He'd oughta know the ranches and lay o' the land down the Arkansas. I'll come to see him. Maybe he can make a good guess as to where my trail herd would be by now."

BOB unsaddled Midnight, rubbed him down himself and fed him a big helping of oats, talking to him affectionately while he did so.

As he left the stable and went searching his way across muddy intersections and along the board sidewalks of the town, the sun was just setting in a great splash of vivid colours behind a horizon piled high with broken clouds. There was no one to challenge his appearance for a hundred yards along this little-used portion of the street, but on ahead, where the bigger business houses began, he could see a beehive of humanity. All along past the Cowboys' Oasis Saloon and Dance Hall, Wright and Beverley's Commissary & Freighting house and beyond the Trail's End Hotel, where he hoped to bunk for the night, there were scores of men moving hither and yon, or lolling against awning posts, talking.

He looked back at the glory in the west and remembered a sunset only four days back along the Chisholm Trail. He and Tom had sat in their saddles at the end of a long, hard day of work and witnessed just such a burst of colour amid broken clouds in the west. He remembered how the boy had loved life and all that it could give him. He turned and went on toward the unfriendly crowds up ahead of him, glad that he had been given unmistakably clues to the killers of his brother; to those who had ruined his own bright hope of a happy, prosperous future.

He had to learn more exactly just what connections Buffalo Judson had in Dodge City, when the trail herd raider would likely be in town again. More than anything else, he wished to learn, if possible, where Judson would be taking his stolen herd and what disposition would be made of the cattle.

Part of this information was already in hand. Brule Garon, city marshal of Dodge, was backing Judson to some extent. Just how much was something yet to be uncovered. From Long John, the old Cherokee cowboy and horsebreaker, he expected to secure leads as to where stolen cattle could be kept in the ranching country eastward until sold to the packers. Thousands of cattle could not be kept in that country without the co-operation of some ranch owner, for all the grazing land in south-eastern Kansas had already been pre-empted and most of that across the line in the Indian Nations which was available for cattle grazing was leased. Long John had ridden all over that territory. He would know.

But Long John could not be questioned until later in the night. In the meantime Bob meant to buy fresh clothing and secure a room at the Trail's End Hotel, where he could take a bath and secure a refreshing night's rest to fortify him against the severe demands soon to be made on his stamina.

Wright & Beverley's big establishment could be reached only by passing the Cowboys' Oasis. A half-dozen men were in front of the saloon. Three of them slouched lazily against the wall; the others stood in a bunch, talking, at the outer edge of the wide board sidewalk. As Bob came near he recognised two of those against the wall. Those two were Barker and Shorty. They were watching him intently, as were also the four other men. Those at the outer edge ceased their talk.

Two women were at that moment picking their way across the open space between Wright & Beverley's and the Oasis, coming as if they would pass Bob Fannin directly in front of the saloon and dance hall. He barely noticed them, for his attention was chiefly directed at the hawk-eyed, silent men just before him, although he seemed, to all outward appearances, to give them slight notice. With nerves tautened, every sense alert, he walked the gantlet of those six men while boisterous revelry resounded within the Oasis.

The two women ahead were young and very pretty. They turned in toward a single door at the farther side of the wide frame building, ten steps beyond the main entrance to the saloon. Bob became more aware of their presence then because he was passing the six men, three on each side of him, and he wondered if they would try any gun-play while those women were so close. He noticed a sign on that small door before which the women stopped. It said, "Private Stage Entrance." He guessed that the girls were actresses playing in the only theatrical entertainment this rough border-town boasted.

The youth could not help noticing how one of the girls put out her hand to detain the other from entering the door. She stepped up against the wall and said something to the girl who had a hand on the door-knob. At first Bob thought she was looking at him, but as he took another step or two nearer her, he saw by the glow of the sunset on her fair, lovely face that she was looking beyond and back of him. She seemed to be very intently watching something or somebody. Her eyes were very blue and glowed now with expectancy. That which she awaited was evidently not very pleasant, for her expression was one of displeasure. Bob Fannin knew then that she was watching the men on each side of him and he kept his gaze on her face as he went past the men, knowing that it would mirror for him the extent of any danger.

HE saw a sudden flash of fright in her eyes. Instantly he leaped toward the front of the sidewalk boards. As he jumped he whirled to land with face toward the men. A gun flashed

and roared. Bob saw it kicking up in the hand of the man named Shorty.

The girls were screaming frantically. Barker had his gun out. He fired a second after the roar of Shorty's gun. The bullet zipped past Bob Fannin's ear as he ducked and brought both hands up, each with a flaming, thundering .45 in it.

One of Bob's first bullets tumbled Shorty backwards doubled in a knot and grasping at his stomach. Barker staggered, twisted half around, and dropped his gun from a right arm that dangled loosely. Young Fannin was dancing and ducking like a dervish, his thumbs busily snapping back the hammers of his two guns as he gave bullet for bullet to the four companions of Barker and Shorty. He felt the impact of a slug which found him in spite of his lithe acrobatics. It kicked at his right shoulder and made him miss one of the last two men still on their feet before him.

The girls had disappeared. Bob leaped across the sidewalk toward the door they had entered. He backed into the partial protection the groove of the doorway afforded. A bullet slashed across his chest, burning his flesh. The two remaining gunners were flattened against the wall fifteen feet away, each firing at him. A bullet ripped at the door facing and drove fine splinters into his throat and cheek.

He fired at the forward man from his left-hand gun, dropping the fellow back against his crowding companion. The latter whirled about and dashed wildly against the swinging doors of the saloon entrance, knocking down men who had been peering over the tops of the doors. Barker had disappeared. Four men lay dead or dying upon the wide board sidewalk.

Bob flipped out the cylinders of his empty .45's and hastily stuffed in fresh cartridges, watching the swinging doors of the saloon with quick side glances up and down the street. Where a great many men had been in sight but a short time before, not one could be seen in the open now.

The door against which he leaned for protection gave under his pressing body. Moving with the agility of a cat he turned round the door facing, lifting a gun. The door opened part way. The wide, frightened blue eyes of the beautiful girl who had given him timely warning of the attack looked at him in the waning light.

"Come in here quick!" she whispered in great haste. "They're going out back to surround you. Come! Don't stand there as if you're afraid of me. I'll help you hide!"

Bob may have looked at her as if she added to his wariness, but it was not fear she stirred in him. She was beautiful. Her voice was sweetly mellow in spite of her alarm and vehemence. Her hair was coiled on the top of her head in thick, glossy rolls of dark red gold. Never had he seen a woman so lovely.

She was asking him to come in and hide under her protecton. He straightened and laughed, the first time in over two days that he had found reason to laugh. While watching the sidewalk right and left with wary, nervous glances, he replied to her.

"I'm sure much obliged to you, ma'am," he told her, "because you certainly did save my life a minute ago, and much obliged for your offer to help me. Just the same, I cain't hide behind a woman's skirts. I'll be getting along to the Trail's End. Sure hope I see you again."

She looked at him as if stupefied, as it was incredible that he could be so reckless.

She did not know the common-sense rudiments of frontier psychology as Bob Fannin knew them. He had probably never heard of the word psychology, but he knew that if he ran from his enemies now they would be after him like a yelping pack of bloodthirsty wolves. On the other hand, if he showed no fear, showed that he was ready to swap more lead after the lucky triumph of his first encounter, he would be safe for a while at least.

"You're wounded!" she cried in alarm,

looking at his blood-soaked shoulder. "Come in and let me bandage that hurt."

"It's just a scratch or two," he deprecated. I'll get some arnica and fix it. You better not be too kind-hearted to a Texas man, ma'am. They'd get plumb hard set against you for it. S'long."

He started toward Wright & Beverley's Commissary, but looked over his shoulder and saw a man step out of the saloon's swinging doors. In the greying twilight he saw a metal star on the man's dark vest.

"Hold on a minute, feller," the man called. "I'm Marshal Garon. We've got to have a talk."

CHAPTER VII

MARSHAL GARON came on toward Bob Fannin, but not hastily. The young Texan stepped out beyond the line of the saloon dance hall to where he could see all the open space out back between the saloon and the commissary. He didn't want any enemies coming up behind him while Garon confronted him here.

Some men stepped out of the saloon back of Garon now and began lifting the prostrate bodies into the saloon.

"You're rather nifty with them guns, young feller," Garon said when but a few steps away. He was looking at Bob sharply.

Garon wore a flat-topped, broad-brimmed black hat, flowing black tie, white shirt, dak tailored suit and store shoes. He was a middle-aged man of medium build, rather handsome in a dark, hard way, wearing a black moustache that was trained to sharp points. Around his waist was a cartridge-filled belt, to which a big six-gun was suspended at his right hip.

"That a compliment, mister," Bob asked, "or criticism?"

"Both," Garon replied readily, but there was no hint of friendliness, neither real nor simulated in his tone or manner. "I guess you've heard of the rule against Texans coming across the river into town wearing guns."

He stopped on the edge of the sidewalk, five feet away from where Bob stood on the packed mud of the trail between buildings.

"And I heard that it was a one-sided rule," Bob admitted coolly. "Texans are s'posed to come in plumb helpless against any o' this big pack o' gun-toting lobos in town that want to squirt lead at 'em. I'm wearing my smoke irons, Mr. Garon, until everybody else agrees to put theirs in shammy-bags."

"How long are you staying and what's your business?" Garon demanded.

"That's a team o' right personal questions that I don't aim to answer, mister. Howsoever, I'll just sort of volunteer this much: 'fore I leave here, you'll know a lot about my business."

The first visible display of anger clouded Garon's face then.

"All right, Texan," he grated. "You're inviting trouble and begging for it. I might arrest you for murder, but I'll just save the tax fund a bit by letting you ride your own quick trail to hell."

"I started riding that trail two days ago, Garon," Bob Fannin spoke with a smoky look in his eyes and a sibilant, quiet resonance to his voice. "If it leads me clean down to hell 'fore I find a certain party and some dunghill lice that hang along with him, then I'll sure be riding the trail you mention."

"Who you looking for?" Garon asked with a softened, placating note, showing quick interest.

"The Lord sure give you a funny shaped tongue, Garon," Bob declared. "It's a big hook with a dot at the butt end. I guess, having such a tongue, you just cain't help asking questions."

Bob knew how to read sign on a man and he believed that Brule Garon was a deadly swift gunslinger, but when he remembered that Garon was back of Buffalo Judson and responsible for the murder of Tom, he tried to drive the man into drawing. The wound in his shoulder was be-

ginning to throb with pain, which added to his desire to end this draggy conference. Was Garon holding him up while a trap was laid? He slipped a glance again toward the back of the buildings. It was getting dark quickly because heavy clouds had gathered in the west, cutting off the glow of twilight.

But Garon, after biting his lips for a few seconds, turned abruptly and walked back toward the Oasis' swinging doors. Bob went on across to Wright & Beverley's. People had come out of hiding along the street. There was a semblance of the recent movement and jangle of talk everywhere.

A young woman waited on him in the big commissary, getting his articles together on the counter before him with trembling, nervous hands while he leaned with his back to her most of the time. He had to keep watch on the door and a furtive eye on a group of men at the far side of the wide store. Garon's apparent backdown out there had not convinced Bob. They would not waste time now in arranging for his murder in a more subtle and certain manner than the bungled first attempt.

He bought underclothing and a dark blue woollen shirt, black corduroy pants and a pair of Coffeyville boots to replace his worn and water-wrinkled trail clothes; a box of healing salve and plaster and a fresh box of cartridges. As the young woman leaned over the counter tying up his bundle, she spoke little above a whisper to him without looking up from her task.

"Be mighty careful, mister," she murmured. "Don't walk in the dark too much and watch while you sleep to-night."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. "I'll sure be watching every whichaway and right glad to find everybody here ain't down on Texans."

She went on tying an unnecessary extra knot to prolong her talk.

"It's just—Brule Garon's clique hates Texans," she went on, speaking as she bent over the bundle with busy hands. "They hate them because they steal their cattle and they want to keep Texans out of Dodge City, so they won't learn how the crooks work their big rustling business."

"Can you tell me how they work it?" he asked, leaning toward her.

"There you are, mister," she replied, shoving the bundle towards him. "That'll be twenty-eight dollars and fifty cents."

For a second her change of manner and speech hit him queerly, then he heard easy steps behind and turned his head quickly. Two men came toward him. They wore town clothes and had the bulk of breast-guns under their left arms.

"Hello, Sally," one of them greeted the girl.

SHE returned the greeting with light gaiety while she made change for Bob. The latter took his bundle under left arm, walked around the men and out of the lamp-lighted store.

It was nearly dark outside. People up and down the street were merely moving shadows. Bob went quickly away from the light within the store back of him, heading for the Trail's End Hotel. He paid for a room and asked the long-necked, spectacled elderly clerk not to register him, nor let anyone know which room he occupied. He wondered if the clerk was another of Garon's crowd.

On going to the room assigned to him he found it on the second floor, with one of its two windows opening above the roof of the kitchen extension at the back. That roof slanted down close to the ground in the wagon-yard behind the hotel. This did not please the cautious young Texan. It would be easy for anyone to come at him over that roof. He tried to get another room, but the clerk said that was the only one available.

Bob took his guns to the bathroom with him and bathed hurriedly. He doctored and plastered a bandage over two small bullet holes where a slug had gone through the flesh at the top of his right shoulder. A bullet burn across his chest needed only a smear of salve.

Dressed in his clean, new clothing, he went down for supper in the hotel dining-room. He selected a table in a far corner where he could command a view of the entire room without turning his head. A half-dozen men and two women sat at other tables eating, or waiting for their suppers. Their ordinary tones of conversation had shivered off into suppressed talk at his entrance and furtive glances were turned fleetingly upon him from time to time. It seemed that the whole town already knew him and felt that he was something sinister.

The one woman waitress had not yet come to take Bob's order when the tall, skinny hotel clerk, came to the entrance of the dining-room with a well-dressed, Derby-hatted man at his elbow. The clerk surveyed the room until he picked Bob out in his corner, then unhesitating guided his companion toward the youth. Bob moved his chair back a little and sat with his hands on his legs not more than a few inches from his guns.

His unobtrusive precautionary movement was evidently seen and recognised by the man with the clerk, for he smiled at Bob as he came on to the table. There was friendliness in that unaffected smile and in the twinkle of the man's clear, alert eyes. The lanky clerk leaned on the table with a bony hand opposite the young Texan and spoke.

"I didn't learn your name, young man," he said, "and I won't be asking it, but here's a man who wants to meet you for a friendly talk. Like you, he's from out of town and," he leaned closer and spoke lower, "he's not one o' Brule Garon's crowd."

Bob arose and looked into the stranger's clean-cut, handsome face. A lamp fastened on the wall with a reflector back of it threw generous light. The gangling clerk went away, leaving the two younger men shaking hands.

The stranger's firm warm handclasp and magnetic smile swept away Bob Fannin's momentary doubts. He was little older than Bob himself, but he had a rich, well-trained dark moustache and lights in his eyes that seemed able to penetrate through all pretence and cunning. He was not as tall as Bob, but his body was slender and supple with healthy young strength.

"I'm sure glad to meet you, pardner," he said in a voice that was as clear and firm as his looks. "I stood across the street a while ago and saw the show. You throw 'em fast and handsome. They don't seem to even touch you."

They sat down then, facing each other across the small table.

"A little singe and a nick 'crost the shoulder that don't count for much," Bob told him. "I'm mighty glad you saw it if you'd witness for me. They might yet try to prop up a case o' murder against me."

"Nonkh," the handsome stranger shook his head with that cryptic negative, "they won't be doing that, I just come in town, quiet-like, yesterday, but I've sized 'em up. I may set up a tannery business here."

"Oh," Bob Fannin breathed the word with visible disappointment. "I thought you was—ah—I musta read your brand wrong—guess there'll be plenty buffalo and cow hides to be had here for many a year to come."

The stranger was grinning. Merriment danced in his eyes as he watched Bob's face and listened to his stumbling embarrassment. His head was slowly shaking a negation of Fannin's erroneous surmise.

"I specialise in tanning polecat hides only," he said. "I come over from the Medicine Lodge at the asking of cattle buyers and merchants doing business here. Expect to get a U.S. Marshal's commission in a short spell. Aim to collect a small bunch 'round me that sides with the law and knows how to tan the stink off'v polecat hides. Business oughta be fast and plentiful for a little while. Thought maybe you might wanta set in the game since you showed to-night how you can draw aces."

HE was still smiling at the puzzlement in Bob Fannin's face. Bob was remembering old man Bodine's remark about Bat Masterson.

"Say, Stranger," the young Texan spoke in a whisper across the table, gazing at his companion's face, "are you Bat Masterson that they've asked to come in here?"

"That's me, pardner, but not blowing my horn now. Don't wanta jump this wild herd here yet—not till that paper comes and I come to agreement with the mayor and leading business men here. How 'bout it? You wanta throw in?"

"Aren't you taking chances asking a stranger that blows in town and gets shot at to throw in with the law?"

"You're not exactly a stranger, Bob Fannin," came the cool, smiling answer to further surprise Bob. I know Texas pretty much like Kansas and other places. I've heard of you, but didn't know that was you playing tag with them fellers a while ago till I went in backstage at the Oasis and asked your pretty girl friend. She told me."

"What girl?"

Bob sat back suddenly, hands braced against the table edge, as he stared, wondering, at Bat Masterson. The man was springing too many surprises at him.

"The girl who howled a warning at you when that feller was aiming to unjoint your backbone, the one you talked to afterwards. Don't you know her?"

"Never saw her before," Bob declared, feeling strangely light and happy, "though I'd sure admire to know her better. Who is she and how'd she come to know me?"

"Didn't ask her all that," Masterson replied, a bit puzzled now, himself. "She's doing some sort'v act over there on the Oasis stage. I just wandered in backstage and poked around till I found her. I figured a woman like her could give me a better line on a man than anybody else. Of course, when she said you was Bob Fanning I knew enough, but she gargled your name just like she thought the sun, moon and all the stars rose and set in your front yard. She's a mighty pretty little dumpling. Guess I'll drop in to-night and see what her act is."

Bob was looking at Masterson and drinking in his revelations avidly. Then, a moment after Masterson ceased speaking, the lively expression of pleasure in his face changed suddenly as he sat back in his chair. A dark, bitter look shadowed his eyes and tightened his lips.

"No—no," he said slowly, as if speaking only to himself. "I won't. I was damn' near forgetting."

The waitress finally came then to take their orders. Bat Masterson gave his order and studied his young friend's moody face while Bob ordered his supper, wondering what it was that the youth was "near forgetting" which caused such a lightning change in his face. The waitress went away.

"What's on your mind, Bob?" he asked with gentle sympathy. "Something's hanging there like a ton of lead."

"I'd be worse than one o' them dirty, murdering lobos," Box explained in what was enigmatic language to Bat Masterson, "if I went loco over a pretty pair o' blue eyes and a big lariat o' hair that looks like coiled silk and let that make me forget the heavy chore I gotta 'tend to. I come mighty near to forgetting how a slimey snake murdered my kid brother and another man just two nights back and run off my trail herd and made me ashamed to go back home to south Texas. I've gotta finish that trail ride 'fore I take up any other one."

Masterson leaned forearms on the table and spoke closer to Bob.

"Tell me the whole kaboodle, won't you, Bob?" he asked. "Maybe I can throw a little help if you need it."

Bob lifted his moody gaze from the table-cloth and looked Masterson steadily in the eyes as he replied.

"You just asked me back a ways, Masterson, to throw in with you and the law. I didn't say I would because I want to get a long jump ahead o' the law."

He told tersely of the trail herd stampede on the Cimarron and of his brother's and Luke Brinkley's murder; of his

swimming the Cimarron and finding the horse thieves' camp; told of his wonder horse, Midnight.

"And now," he finished, "I'm gonna collect money and plenty of it from these here thieving devils to send back home to them that rightly owned them cattle, and after that, because they murdered my poor little button of a brother, I'll be trying to plant enough lead in 'em to sink Noah's Ark. If I throwed in with the law like you ask, Masterson, I couldn't do all that quick and in my own way, could I?"

It was a challenge, not a request for information.

"It'll be quite a spell yet," Masterson replied, "before reg'lar courts and juries get to acting out this way. For a while, officers of the law'll just have to be their own judge, jury and executioner."

"And somebody else might do the executing on Buffalo Judson," Bob countered. "I don't want you, or anybody, taking that pleasure away from me. I've never seen the thieving polecat, but that lobo o' his that I knocked off in the raid mentioned him, then the horse thieves at their camp told more. I know it was him. He's my meat and I aim to feed him to the buzzards in one big, stinking lump. They might get me first. If they do, then I hope you'll do your judge, jury and executioner job in reg'lar law."

The waitress came with their suppers then. While they ate, Masterson thought of Bob's strange words about the red-headed actress and of the girl's unexplainable interest in a man who did not know her.

"I'd like to have you around with me at the Oasis," he said, "when I go to-night to see that pretty girl do her act, but it mightn't be wise for you to go. That's Brule Garon's place and about the higgest in town. All his crooked strings tie in there. It'd be like throwing red pepper in their eyes for you to bruise in on 'em."

Bob Fannin did not answer at once. While he ate he struggled with his thoughts of duty and this strangely enticing thing that had crept up to lure him from his stern task. Then he thought of the obvious fact which had until then escaped him: The girl who had seemed so lovely was working for Brule Garon, owner of the Oasis. If he could meet and talk with her, she could tell him much that he needed to know. With Bat Masterson backing his hand, he would beard Satan in his den.

"Sure I'll go with you, Masterson," he finally declared. "I'd like to look the place over again, maybe get a sign or two that'll lead where I wanta go."

CHAPTER VIII

THE two young men were about to finish their supper. Bob Fannin was reaching for his hat on a chair beside him. Bat Masterson had arisen and already put on his Derby. The young Texan was thinking of that Derby and the neatly-tailored town clothes, the debonair carriage and cool, devil-may-care atmosphere about the famous buffalo hunter and six-gun artist, Bat Masterson.

In that moment Bob Fannin was learning what many another was to learn, from the powder smoke perfumed air of Tombstone, Arizona, to New York drawing-rooms of a much later day: Bat Masterson was a kingpin in any circle wherever men foregathered; in fringed leather coat or Prince Albert, in high-heeled boots or patent-leather, he was easily at home; other men adjusted themselves to him and liked him—or hated him to their regret.

Three men entered the dining-room from the hotel lobby and came directly, purposefully toward the two who were preparing to leave. One was a tall, heavy-shouldered, eagle-eyed man, who seemed at once stamped by his dress and manner as the business man and trader; the two others seemed pigmies beside him, one oldish, bald and with a worried look on his sharp, boney face and in the nervous manner in which he mopped his hairless scalp with a large handkerchief. The third was young, erect of carriage, very fair of complexion, handsome in a com-

plaisant, easy manner like Bat Masterson, and was the only one of the three wearing a hip gun. Young Fannin's glance flashed to Masterson.

"Friends of mine," Masterson told Bob. "Mr. Wright, the trader; Mayor Wilkins, and Luke Short, a little keg of gunpowder."

"One minute, Mr. Masterson," little sharp-voiced Mayor Wilkins held up the hand on which was draped the large handkerchief. "We'd like a word or two and this corner is as good as any for a quiet talk while we eat supper."

"We've finished our supper and are going, Mr. Wilkins," Bat Masterson replied. Bob noticed a disinclination in Masterson's manner to palaver with the little bald-headed mayor. "How are you, Mr. Wright—howdy, Luke."

"But we've got to have a clear understanding, Mr. Masterson." Wilkins objected complainingly. His sharp little grey eyes gave Bob Fannin a displeased glance that was quick and fearful, like the dart of a finger testing the heat of a stove top. "Our talk in my place this morning was inconclusive and now we find you associating with a man who has just killed men on our streets."

"Am I to understand, Mr. Wilkins," Masterson asked coolly, "that if I undertake to enter this election against your present marshal and win, I must seek your permission for each individual I may want to associate with?"

"Oh, now, now," Wilkins exclaimed, stopping three feet from the end of the table while he nervously wiped his scalp again, "I don't mean that. We want a man who can overawe the lawless element without so much bloodshed and violence in our city. By your association with men who resort to violence, it is a natural inference that you might use your known talents in the wrong way."

He cast another fearful, frowning glance at Bob Fannin without meeting the eyes of the latter.

"I thought that was all settled this morning, Mr. Wilkins," little Luke Short entered the discussion. "You got Mr. Wright and me to come along on the claim you had something new and important to take up with Bat. We agreed to give Bat a free hand in bringing law and safety to Dodge City by any means he wants to use. What else you gonna take up with him?"

"Now, now, now, Luke," Wilkins cajoled, almost crying, "we've just got to put a stop to this constant killing and shooting up our streets. It was you who recommended Mr. Masterson as a man whose very reputation would bring that about."

"You're twisting the bronc's tail the wrong way, Mr. Wilkins," Luke Short objected, while Bat Masterson stood watching the little mayor with a cynical smile. "I never expected or said any such thing. You ain't gonna tame a pack o' wild coyotes right off with a sweet howdy-do-and-be-good-children bluff. Elsewise, we better put up a woman for marshal."

Luke Short glanced at Trader Wright for confirmation.

"He's right, Billy," Mr. Wright agreed. "As I remember our agreement, Bat's to have a free hand until Dodge City is cleared of the lawless crowd."

"Oh, my, my," Mayor Wilkins whined, mopping at his shining scalp furiously, "that'll defeat our purpose. As mayor of the city I insist——"

"All right, Mr. Wilkins," Bat Masterson interrupted, no longer smiling, "you can look elsewhere for your milk and honey marshal. I'm sure not honing overly much for the job. I've applied for a U.S. Marshal commission so's to get after them trail pests, the tickers. I'm tired seeing honest cattlemen robbed of their herds right at our front door."

Masterson pulled his Derby hat down at a jaunty angle, nodded for Bob Fannin to follow and started for the lobby as the few scattered diners in other parts of the room stared.

"Come along, Luke,' he invited. "We're going visiting with one of the mayor's good friends."

LUKE SHORT cast a swift glance of contempt at the little bald-headed mayor and started after Masterson and Fannin. Wilkins cried, "Oh, my, my!" and sat down suddenly in a chair, ringing his hands and twisting his big handkerchief as he gazed after the departing men. Mr. Wright moved around him to a chair across the table from the mayor.

Luke Short caught up with the two taller, hurrying, grim-faced men in the lobby. As the three young men stepped out into the semi-darkness upon the wide board walk under the canopy formed by the hotel's second-floor balcony, a man of gigantic size detached himself from the more shadowed wall and came toward them. He held up a hand even with his dusky face in sign of friendliness.

"Bob Fannin, I come find you," the strange big shadow spoke hastily in a voice of monotone like a bass viol rumbling.

"Hello, Long John," Bob Fannin greeted, and extended a hand to the seven-foot giant. "Why you come find me? I was coming down to see you tonight."

Bat Masterson and Luke Short flanked Bob Fannin, watching the tall Cherokee. Masterson's hand fell lightly upon Bob's shoulder.

"Better move over there where it's darker, Bob," he cautioned. "Too much light back of us here."

Bob led his big Indian friend back to where the latter had stood in the shadows.

"What is it, Long John?" he inquired there.

"Men come, take your horse," was the Indian's startling reply. "Say you steal horse. He in Garon corral now, your saddle on peg in Garon barn. They think nobody know where they put 'em horse. I follow, see 'em ev'thing."

"Did Garon do it himself, Long John?" Luke Short asked the Indian before Bob Fannin could recover from the amazement the message caused.

"Sure," Long John replied at once, "Garon say horse his, say Bob Fannin thief. Two men come in from Cimarron, say Bob Fannin steal horse from them, they come to Bodine barn with Garon, other men come 'long, too. They go hide horse in Garon corral with heap lot other horses, now they in Oasis, make much talk what they do to kill you, Bob Fannin."

He reached out a hand to tap young Fannin on his chest, an Indian's gesture of affection.

"Do you want to go first and take your horse back, Bob?" Masterson asked.

"You're not asking me if I stole the horse?" Bob asked in reply.

"It's a cinch that if you took 'im from Garon's Cimarron corral, you just took a horse that'd been stole somewhere's else," Masterson replied.

"Is that Garon's camp corral a few miles down this side o' the Cimarron below the new Chisholm Trail crossing?" Bob queried.

"It's part of his and Buffalo Judson's set-up," Bat told him. "They collect horses there, then run 'em off north, or out to Colorado and New Mexico to sell."

"Then they're running off about forty-two in the cavvy they stole from my outfit," Bob said through gritting teeth. "Where do they drive the cattle they rustle along the Trail?"

"Scatter 'em over east among several ranches," Masterson explained, "then gather 'em later after their brand vents have healed and drive 'em to market."

"They've got three thousand head o' my cattle and forty-two good mustangs," Bob said. "My bosses expected me to get at least twenty-five thousand dollars for the herd. I've got to get that much out of Garon and Judson, plus about two thousand more for the cavvy and at least two well-tanned polecat hides. They're pretty high-handed in their rustling, like's though they don't skeer at nothing."

"There's not any real law here yet," Luke Short explained, "for 'em to skeer at. They been making the law their own way. We who don't side with the ticker rustlers wanted real law. That's why we wanted Bat Masterson, or Bill Hickok in

here as marshal and sheriff. Bill Wilkins, our two-bit mayor, claimed he'd ride with us, but when it comes to a show-down, he's skeered to buck Brule Garon. Our side ain't strong enough in numbers to vote down Garon's out-of-town bunch that he'd run in to vote, 'less we could keep out the rustler and Mexican vote that Garon uses. Garon is willing for somebody else to be marshal of the city and sheriff of the county long's he picks the man and elects 'im with his wild bunch."

"Where does Garon keep his money?" Bob asked. "He must have a pile with all his rustling and business here in town."

"He's got a big safe in a back room at the Oasis," Short answered. "Bought it in Chicago and had it brought out soon after the railroad built into Dodge. He does more o' the banking business here than Wright & Beverley does."

"That's shore interesting," Bob declared as Luke Short and Bat Masterson looked at him wonderingly. The big Indian had stood silent and motionless while the white men talked. "Mr. Garon's guns make the law and watch over his money. Ain't nothing wrong then in a little competition at making law——"

"There comes Garon and three o' his men now," Bat Masterson nodded toward four men coming to the hotel, passing then across the stream of light from Wright & Beverley's commissary.

THEY waited in silence while the four oncoming men came near. Those four were wary and their searching eyes spied the four figures beside the wall of the hotel.

"Hello," Garon called, halting his men, straining his eyes at the shadowy figures by the wall. "That you, Luke?"

"Yeah, it's me, Garon. Was you looking for me?" Short asked.

"No," Garon answered, still gazing closely at Short's companions while his men spread out before and behind him. "Who's that with you, Luke?"

"Three o' my friends," was Short's unenlightening answer.

"That's Long John and Bat Masterson and the Texas feller," Garon named them. "I was looking for you, Tex. Come on in the hotel."

"What for, Garon?" Bob Fannin asked in a very quiet voice.

"I've a matter o' law to attend to with you," Garon informed, a tinkle of rising anger in his voice.

"Might it be mixed up with horses?" Bob asked in the same tone.

"It damn' sure is," Garon replied explosively. "Get on in the hotel office."

"You claim a certain black horse that I rode in here on is yours, don't you, Garon?" Bob asked.

"I see your Cherokee friend has been talking," Garon answered, with scorn. "You're damned right that horse is mine. He's been my own saddle horse for a long time. I put 'im out on my Cimarron ranch for a rest and you stole him, Texas. The two men you stole him from at the point of a gun are here to testify against you. I'm arresting you for horse-stealing, Texas—whatever your name is. Are you submitting peaceful?"

"You're a pretty good gambler as well as a big business man, ain't you, Garon?" Bob asked, without lifting his voice.

"What's that got to do with it?" Garon snapped. "Come out in the light and give up them guns peaceful."

"Them's three o' his fastest gunslingers with 'im," Luke Short whispered near Bob's ear. "We're right with you, pardner. Now as good as any time for a show-down."

Bob had heard of Luke Short as a man little less of a wizard with shooting-irons than Bat Masterson or Bill Hickok. He knew Masterson had two breast guns under his coat. Long John was an indeterminate quantity.

"I'll gamble with you, Garon," Bob went on. "If the black horse I rode in is yours, like you say, he'll prove it. Let's go to your corral where you put him when you stole him from the Bodine stable. You stand on one side of the corral and call him. I'll stand at the other side and call him. If he goes to you instead o'

coming to me, he's your horse. If he comes to me, which he ain't likely gonna do if he's been yours so long like you say, then he's mine. Are you game?"

Mr. Wright and Mayor Wilkins came out of the hotel door before Garon could answer. Wilkins, more fearful than ever, demanded to know what was going on. Garon started to explain, but Luke Short cut him off.

"Garon accuses this young feller of stealing a horse from him," Short explained. "Texas claims the horse is his and offers to prove it in a pretty fair way by letting the horse decide who's his owner."

He went on to tell Wilkins and Wright of Bob's plan to test the ownership of the horse. While Short was talking, a man came from the direction of the Oasis, started to pass the group. Garon called him, spoke a few words very low in his ear. The man then hastened off, going on his errand toward Garon's stable.

"Sounds to me like a damn' clever idee," Mr. Wright declared, while little Mayor Wilkins cleared his throat loudly and seemed anxious to speak. "Where've you been riding a black horse, Garon? I haven't seen you ride nothing 'round here but that white mare o' yours."

"I been keeping the black down to the Arkansas river place," Garon answered nervously, without moving his watchful eyes from Bob Fannin and the latter's companions. "He's my main saddle-horse when down to the ranch. One o' the boys had to ride 'im over to the Cimarron river place the other day and I told him to let the black rest there for a week or two. This Texas feller comes along the other night, held up my two men there at the point of a gun, stole this black and fourteen other horses."

"What did your man, Buffalo Judson, do with the forty-two broncs he stole from me, Garon?" Bob Fannin asked.

"Buffalo Judson!" Garon exclaimed. "I've got nothing to do with Buffalo Judson——"

"Except to back him up in his so-called tick-fever raids on Texas trail herds," Bat Masterson entered the discussion for the first time, interrupting Garon's heated speech.

GARON turned his glare toward the indistinct face of Bat Masterson and was about to answer, swelling with rage, but Wright, towering almost as large as the silent, shadowy figure of Long John, stepped forward and spoke again.

"See here, Garon," he said placatingly, "I don't see why you can't take up the proposition this young Texas feller makes. If the black isn't carrying a brand to prove his owner, then he'll recognise you 'fore he will a stranger, if you've rid him long's you say you have. Let's go all together and settle the question peaceably."

"This Texas feller's been riding the black two days," Garon argued. "That might make a difference."

"Not if you've rid him two years."

"All right," Garon submitted, a sudden sly note in his voice. "We'll go try it out, but if he's worked on this horse of mine so's to make the horse come to him instead of to me, he's still got to be arrested for stealing them other fourteen horses."

"We'll cross that crick when we get to it," massive Mr. Wright replied. "The young feller, I take it, claims the black is his and makes a fair offer to prove it. That might have a lot to do with the rest of the charge. Lead on to the horse, Garon."

Garon's stable and corral was at the other end of the main street from the Bodine livery stable. Before starting to go on past the hotel, Garon told one of his men to go back to the Oasis and get more men.

"None o' that, Garon," Mr. Wright snapped. "We're here to see that this thing is done reg'lar. If this young feller proves the black is his, he'll still be here to answer the other charge. You don't need a mob to take him."

"You're damned right I don't," Garon replied sullenly. "My three deputies here

will walk behind us to see no tricks are played. Come on, all of you."

He whispered something in the ear of one of his men, then started the procession past the hotel front. His three men dropped back to bring up the rear. Mayor Wilkins went along, toddling after Wright and Garon, sputtering and wheezing. Long John stepped in beside Bob Fannin; Bat Masterson and Luke Short walked close behind the Indian and Bob. Short stepped up close to Bob and murmured:

"Keep a wide eye out for these cutters behind us, Texas," he warned. "If you prove your play, anything's li'ble to happen."

"Thanks, pardner," Bob answered over his shoulder. "I'm hep to that part o' the game."

CHAPTER IX

They came to the stable and big corral owned by Brule Garon, much the largest of the three such businesses in Dodge. Three men were there in charge of the place, three men as hard-looking as the three who had wordlessly followed the procession to the stable. One of the three was the man Garon had spoken to in front of the hotel.

Garon had several lanterns brought out and put them into the hands of his men. During the interim since the discussion in front of the hotel, he seemed to have been thinking. He exposed the result of his thoughts now.

"Let's get this down straight, now," he said as the group of tense men gathered in the long centre passageway between the two lines of stalls in the big barn. "We'll go out there in the corral where there's lots of horses. The black is among them. It's just possible that he'll be scared of the lights and all of us there, like most of the other broncs'll be. If he won't come out to either my call or this Texas feller's call, that'll prove he's not this feller's horse, since Texas is so sure he'll come to him. Agreed?"

"All right with me, Garon," Bob Fannin agreed.

In plentiful lantern light, the strangely mixed group of men went out into the big corral, leaving the wide roller door to the barn open behind them. A large herd of horses congregated in a fairly compact mass in the rear half of the corral. Many pairs of shining animal eyes glared toward the light of the lanterns and a chorus of snorts greeted the visitors. A few horses stirred nervously, some trying to escape the glare of the light by retreating behind their less timid herd mates.

Garon stepped out in front of the other men and offered his call.

"Come, Blackie, cope, cope! Here, Blackie, cope, cope!" he coaxed toward the mass of wall-eyed, suspicious horses. "Come to me, Blackie!"

He waited a half minute, but no horse stirred to leave the herd.

"All right, Texas," Garon told Fannin. "Go ahead. See if he'll come to you."

"Are you sure he's in that herd?" Bob asked, suspiciously studying the line of front horses. "I don't see anything that looks like 'im in front there, and he wouldn't be so skittish as them others are. He's a man's horse, not just a bronc."

"Hedging, Texas?" Garon asked sarcastically.

Bob didn't answer the uncivil question, but puckered his lips and whistled, then called.

"Here, Midnight! Come here, Midnight, and get your oats!"

In two days along the trail from the Cimarron, he had thus trained Midnight to come for his bag of oats after a spell of grazing during the noon rests and in the evening.

All eyes were upon the restive herd of horses in the corral, backs turned to the barn and stalls. A sudden violent out-

burst of kicking and whinneying inside the barn made every man turn his head quickly in that direction. Something crashed with the loud sound of breaking timbers. A long, black shape, snorting and whinneying, backed out of a stall into the stream of light in the passageway and whirled to run toward Bob Fannin. He shied at the group of others whom he had to pass and rushed on to Bob, whuckering a low, gladsome cry of welcome.

The young Texan rubbed the velvety black nozzle that nudged against his shoulder affectionately, patted the beautiful animal's neck and turned a triumphant grin upon the dark, angry face of Brule Garno.

"So you thought he wouldn't come to me if you had 'im tied in a stall, Garon?" he jibed.

"By jiminy!" Mr. Wright exclaimed, bursting with admiring wonder as he gazed at the black gelding. "If that ain't the prettiest thing I ever seen in my life! I never knew a horse could be so crazy in love with a man. That settles it, Garon. That horse sure knows his owner."

Brule Garon seemed about to burst with pent-up rage. His dark scowl did not hide his struggle to reach some unusual decision. Six of his men, all armed with guns swinging at their hips, stood behind him, four holding lanterns in their left hands, right hands free to go for their guns. Mayor Wilkins was making funny noises through his nose, standing over beyond Mr. Wright. The latter faced Bob and the horse, with his right side turned toward Garon and his men. Bat Masterson and Luke Short stood with their backs toward the corral, facing Garon and his men, and very close to Fannin. Bob had his left hand on the mane of the black horse, his right dangling at his side near his gun. Long John was leaning against the wall of the barn.

Mr. Wright's unofficial, but nevertheless weighty decision of the case had barely been spoken when Garon reached his decision and sped with lightning movement to its execution. His hand was suddenly filled with gun and the gun bore threateningly upon the men before him. His six men back of him acted with a speed that proved they had been forewarned. They had their guns in hand as Garon spoke.

"Surrender, Texas!" Garon ordered. "I'm arresting you for horse-stealing and murder. Lift 'em quick! And you, too, Bat Masterson and Luke Short! Lift 'em! you're siding with this Texas horse-thief—go get their guns, Ruggins!"

He snapped the order to one of his men as Fannin, Masterson and Short lifted their hands shoulder high. Mayor Wilkins was groaning in an agony of fright; Long John and Mr. Wright stood silently watching the scene.

It was not until the man addressed as Ruggins started forward to take the guns of the three men that these latter, facing Garon and the wide passageway of the livery stable, saw a moving figure in the shadows of the barn.

"Don't turn, gents, or I'll blast yuh!" a voice, dearly familiar to the startled ears of Bob Fannin, spoke from those barn shadows. "Hist 'em, yourselves! Ev'y one o' you skunks with lanterns and guns in your hands, hist 'em!"

There was loud, vitriolic force behind those words. Garon and every one of his men lifted guns into the air obediently and stood very still, some of them visibly quaking, fearful to turn their heads toward this unexpected challenger.

"Come around back of them, Bob," Sam Lucas's voice commanded further, "an' grab them guns from 'em. I don't know what this is all about, but I sure aim to find out what they was doin' pointin' guns at my trail boss."

BOB felt like shouting for joy as he hurried in behind the men with uplifted hands and began collecting their guns. In spite of the fact that Sam Lucas had made good his threat to come on against his orders to return to South Texas, Bob was ready to hug his fiery segundo out of sheer joy for his disobedience.

He tossed the collected guns out into

the hoof-stirred mud of the corral and turned to face Garon.

"Thanks, Sam," he called over the heads of Garon and his men, "that'll do. You sure did blow in proper as the old woman said to the hurricane down in Texas. Now, Mr. Garon, I'll take my horse out o' your stinking corral and barn, but I'm not leaving town, so don't worry —or maybe you'll be worrying because I'm staying for a spell yet. Mr. Wright has played fair and impartial. I'm not running out on your charge o' horse-stealing, but I'm keeping my guns and plenty open space for moving where I want to until I prove who the real horse-thieves are—and the cow-rustlers, too. If you want to bring up your two witnesses to-morrow against me, and do some explaining yourself as to how you had broncs at your Cimarron ranch with south Texas brands on 'em, then just come ahead to Mr. Wright's store to-morrow morning."

He asked Long John if he would recognise the saddle and bridle Garon had brought away from Bodine's on Midnight, and the Indian was positive he would. Bob then had the Indian pick the saddle and bridle out from the racks at the front of the barn, put them on Midnight and ride away on him toward the Bodine stable.

A few minutes later Bob, Sam Lucas, Masterson and Short left Mr. Wright and Mayor Wilkins in the beginning of a heated argument with Garon, who bitterly accused them of "siding with them damn' Texas gunmen that want to overrun Dodge."

"This business will be settled proper to-morrow," Garon shouted at the four young men leaving the barn. "If you damn' Texas horse thieves are wise, you'll be jumping fast for Texas 'fore daylight finds you, and that goes for other meddlesome onesiders," he added for Bat Masterson's benefit. Some of his men were gingerly stepping around in the mud of the corral, picking up their guns.

Outside of the barn, as the four of them walked hastily along the board-walk toward the hotel and better lighted section of the street, Bob introduced Sam Lucas to Masterson and Short, then plied him with questions.

"How'd you come to show up just at the right second, Sam, you old cuss?" he asked.

"I sloped into town a while ago," Sam explained, "left my bronc at Bodine's and come a-hustlin' up to the Trail's End to look for you. I 'spected to find 'em singin' songs over you out in Boot Hill buryin'-grounds, but that flagpole of a clerk at the hotel says you an' them others had jest come on your way to Garon's stable a few minutes before. I asked him what was up, an' he tol' me you an' the city marshal wasn't exactly handin' one 'nother pretty flowers, that maybeso there'd be trouble down to the barn. I hot-footed it an' come into the stable jest when that big beaut' of a horse goes a-bustin' outa his stall at you. I was right on top o' things from then on. It was plumb easy."

"You sure did it neat that time, Lucas," Bat Masterson said, "but this Garon bunch will be right on top o' you two boys from now on long's you hang 'round here —maybe on me, too. What're you planning to do, Bob?"

"I've got to get a line on what Buffalo Judson's doing," Bob replied. "I'm staying around here on the slim guess that he'll be riding in to see Garon when our herd is salted away somewhere. I heard that the tickers claimed to've drove the Simpson herd last year over into the Nations and scattered them, but they really sold every hoof o' them over east and pocketed the money. I aim to get that money for my herd when Judson and Garon start to pocket it, or mighty soon afterwards."

"Who's Garon?" Sam Lucas asked. "What's he doing in this mess?"

Bob used up the rest of the walk to the Trail's End Hotel in telling Sam Lucas the highlights of what had happened since he hit town, how Garon tied in with Judson and how the local citizens stood in relation to the Garon crowd.

"Gee whizz, Bob," Sam grumbled at

the finish, "if the lay-out is like you say, we'll jest git bush-whacked shore, but, ol' boy, we'll have a passle o' fun 'fore they do it."

"I told you not to mix in it, Sam," Bob reminded him. "It's my fight 'cause they killed my brother and stole the herd I was rodding, but you've got no call to get yourself killed over it."

"Git out, you argyfyin' sonuvagun!" Lucas exclaimed in a hurt tone. "Wasn't I your segundo? Wasn't I at fault much as you a-lettin' 'em nick us thataway? Here's the Trail's End an', man alive! am I cravin' a real bed to sleep in once more! You got a room here?"

"Yeah. You better bunk with me, Sam, so's we can keep a better look-out," Bob advised.

"You better both come over to my place," Luke Short advised, speaking low as two men came out of the hotel eyeing them. "I'll put you up where this gang can't find you while you sleep."

"Thanks, Luke," Bob said, "but no telling how long we'll have to play around here. We better get used to watching out for 'em at all hours. You and Bat come up to the room while Sam gets shined up. After that Bat promised to lead a little visit to the Oasis to see a certain pretty actress do her shenannigan."

"Great jumpin' medicine man!" Bat Masterson exclaimed. "Do you want to go plumb reckless into that place after what's happened, Bob?"

"You said you was going there, Bat. I want to see if there's any loose ends hanging around there to be spliced together and lead somewhere."

He almost confessed that he wanted to see the golden-haired beauty again, but his hope that the girl would be able to help him in a very large way didn't seem good enough reason for him to tell his friends that he was going to see her. Without realising it, he was becoming self-conscious about the girl.

The four of them went up to Bob's room which Sam agreed to share with him. While Sam washed up, the three others talked of Bat Masterson's decision not to run for the office of city marshal.

"I like buffalo-hunting too well to put up with such a sour can of milk like Bill Wilkins," Bat explained. "I'll be hitting it back to my camp on the Medicine Lodge pretty soon. I'll hang 'round long enough to see how you come out, Bob."

"I sure hate to see you turn me down on the election, Bat," Luke Short declared mournfully. "If you'd come in, we could clean up this town and have things pretty rosy here 'fore long."

"Maybe that'll work out later, Luke," Bat replied, "but not while I've got to palaver with Wilkins. He makes me want to slam a .45 across that hairless pate of his. Damn! How I'd like to do that!" His eyes glowed as he said it, relishing the thought.

"By the by, Bob," Bat said, as the four of them left the room, "that's my room right down there, three doors away acrost the hall. If you need me in the night some time, just holler. I saw your pretty red-haired actress friend coming out of this room next to you to-day. I guess she lives here."

Bob stopped and looked at the door of the room Bat indicated. It took on a slightly brighter halo at once. The young Texan went down the stairs quite happy, for the moment forgetful of the other things ahead which were of less rosy pattern.

"You know," Bat Masterson commented as the four of them went across the open space between the commissary and the Oasis, "it might not be a bad idea, after all, going in on Garon's hang-out right off this way. It'll take the breath plumb outa the devils—show 'em we won't skeer at 'em. When Garon sees us, he'll either faint or we'll have the biggest scrap on our hands any four young fools ever run into. The only advantage we'll

have is that we sure will be expectin' it."

As if unconsciously, all four men tightened their gun harness and made sure that the guns were loosened in the holsters, ready for instant draw. Bat Masterson wore his guns in breast holsters under his coat, but he was equally fast with a cross-arm, breast-gun draw, or with a hip-gun to either hand. He wore his breast harness only when dressed in city clothes.

Bat stepped through the wide, coloured glass swinging doors to the main-bar room and dance-hall of the Oasis, leading the four. Bob followed him, then Sam Lucas, Short coming in last. A half horseshoe bar curved out from the wall at the right of the entrance and ran back the full length of the large floor space. Except at the curved end, the bar was nearly full of standing customers engaged in jangling conversation. A floor space forty feet across and extending from the front wall back sixty or seventy feet to a railing six feet in front of the elevated stage took up the entire reach of the house in front of the long bar. Tables for gambling, or at which the dance-hall girls could inveigle customers to buy double-priced drinks were in a row all around the wall. The spacious centre of the floor was left for dancing. Dance girls collected from the customers after each dance for partnering with them.

The tables were all occupied, either with card games or by girls with their drinking partners. A dozen couples danced at the moment of Bob's entrance. The music was furnished by an orchestra of four pieces, piano, drum, violin and banjo. Bob looked at the empty stage and wondered if he was too late to hear the golden-haired girl do her act. He thought with relief of Bat Masterson's statement that she was an actress and not one of the painted dance-hall girls.

Five seconds after Bob followed Bat Masterson through the door, there was a noticeable lull in the rumble of conversation along the bar and around the room. All eyes were turned upon the new arrivals. Three aproned bar-tenders looked their surprise. One of them at the back end of the bar, turned and went hurriedly out a back door into another room there under the stage entrance.

Masterson led the way to the end of the bar, taking his position at the elbow. He spoke to the man who was standing near the elbow at the front side of the bar, nodded for Bob and the others to go in to his right toward the wall. A bartender came to serve them. While he was setting up bottle and glasses, the dance music ceased and the orchestra immediately went into a song piece as the golden-haired girl, dressed in a flouncing pure white dress, came gracefully upon the stage with a bright red fan opened in her hand. She was singing as she came into view from the right wing of the stage.

There was a complete hush to all the conversation and varied activities in the big place. The dancers deserted the floor. Men left their drinks untouched upon the bar, or stood motionless with them in their hands.

The girl's voice was mezzo soprano, low and soothingly mellow at first, assuming more volume as she moved across the stage. She turned at the far side and began a slow, graceful series of whirls and pirouetting, artfully conforming her movements to the rise and fall of her sweet song.

Bob Fannin was enthralled. For the moment he forgot that he was in a live nest of deadly enemies. He had not yet seen Link Spurlock and Stokey Morrison glaring with hateful stare at him from half-way down the line of men at the bar. Spurlock's right hand was bandaged because of the injury Bob's shot had inflicted. The men near the head of the bar were tall. Their big hats cut off Bob's clear view of the girl who had given him the warning that had saved his life. He left his untouched drink upon the bar and moved out beyond Bat Masterson for an unobstructed view.

The singer looked toward him then. He thought there was a momentary pause in her movement and a catch in her voice as she recognised him. After one more turn

she finished her song. The large, scattered crowd clapped hands and shouted for an encore. Bob stood where he was, waiting for her to sing again. She gave the orchestra a signal and started another song. Instead of continuing her slow, graceful dance upon the stage, she came down to the main floor and moved around the room, dancing to the line of men along the bar, whirling slowly about as she came toward Bob Fannin.

Twice before she reached him, she wove in her dance toward the silent, watching men at the bar and seemed to be singing to this or that one in particular. She was near the end of her song by the time she came to the young Texan as he stood watching her every movement, seeing with avid eyes the perfect beauty of her face and form.

She whirled in front of Bob, singing her last words to him. As the crowd burst into applause she finished a curtsey and spoke with cryptic haste: "Leave before they kill you! Come to me at the hotel!" She floated away from him, out across the dance floor, bowing to the shouting crowd as she went on more hurriedly to the stage and disappeared. To those looking on, it had not been apparent that she gave Bob Fannin any more personal notice than she had other individuals along the line of men at the bar.

He turned back to his friends in time to hear Sam Lucas declaiming his admiration.

"Goshawmighty! That little Cherry Maris is the purtiest critter this side o' Heaven!"

CHAPTER X

BOB FANNIN turned to stare his amazement at Sam Lucas.

"Cherry Maris!" he cried. "You mean the singer? Is that Cherry Maris that you boys been raving about?"

"Sure, that's Cherry Maris," Luke Short confirmed, "but it won't loosen none o' Brule Garon's hate on you if he hears she sung to you, Bob. He's crazy mad about her because she won't marry him. She wants to break with him and leave here, but she's 'fraid he'll kill her when she does. Buffalo Judson is just as crazy about her. He and Garon'll prob'ly kill one 'nother 'bout her yet."

Bob looked down at the dapper, handsome little man by his side, feeling cold and strangely sickened by the thought of Brule Garon and Buffalo Judson having the power to force their hateful attentions upon lovely Cherry Maris. It did not occur to him that perhaps a hundred other men were as mad with love for Cherry Maris.

"What's the matter, Bob?" Bat Masterson asked at his elbow. "Aren't you letting a pretty face blind you and slow up your gun hand? Brule Garon's there at the back end of the bar talking to some of his pack. He looked at us when he come from his office."

"Where's his office?" Bob asked, suddenly awake again to the pressing danger.

"Back there under the dressing-rooms and stage, in a tight place with low ceiling."

"I've got to see that girl right now," Bob said, with quick resolution. "She asked me to see her at the hotel, but I'm gonna see her here."

"Better leave the woman alone while hunting pole-cats, pardner," Bat Masterson offered.

"She knows, or ought to know, things that'll help," Bob answered, turning toward the door, leaving his drink on the bar. "You fellers watch out. I'll see you here, or in the hotel."

Before they could remonstrate, he had gone out the door to the street. Sam Lucas started to follow Bob, but Masterson caught his arm.

"I'd wait here, Lucas," he advised. "Your pardner's gone to find that gal back-stage. Let's watch what happens, maybe back his hand from this end if anything busts loose."

"Goshawmighty" Sam Lucas wailed. "Bob Fannin's done gone plumb blind locoed. They'll corner 'im back there an'

kill 'im, sure. Le's lassoo 'im outa here."

He still wanted to follow his reckless young trail boss, but Luke Short and Bat Masterson persuaded him to remain there in the front of the Oasis and await developments.

Luke saw one of his friends watching a poker game at one of the nearest tables and motioned for him to come to the bar.

"Duffy," he said when the man came to him, "go out to my place on the double quick. Tell Arlen and the other boys to sashay 'round here in a hurry. Tell 'em to get all our crowd in here, or hanging 'round close outside—and to come with their hardware."

"Somethin' up the crick, Luke?" Duffy asked, eyes aglow with expectancy.

"Looks like forty-fifty 'coons done got themselves in the corn patch, Duffy," Luke answered, impatient. "Our little crowd'll have their hands full o' more'n fur right here mighty soon if all signs don't fail. Hop on it!"

Duffy stepped lively out the swinging doors then as a bunch of rough, saddle-worn men came swaggering in past him.

"Damn!" Luke Short grated in a low, tense voice there between Bat Masterson and Sam Lucas. His glance had covered the incoming men as Bat Masterson nudged him with an elbow. "Buffalo Judson—and his pack o' hydrophobic coyotes—or the worst part o' them, anyway."

When Bob Fannin went out to the sidewalk he was not guided by just a blind infatuation. He knew that he wanted Cherry Maris above all other things in the world. But Luke Short's declaration that Buffalo Judson was ready to kill Brule Garon about the girl clarified Bob's mind as nothing else could have done. She must know where Judson could be found. When Brule Garon, the primary force back of the murderers who had killed his brother, was done for, he would still have to find Buffalo Judson. When the grim task was all done, when his debts were all paid, he could then return to Cherry Maris. Just now he must see her for a much different purpose than making love to her.

With the same impatient nature that had moved him to swim the flood torrents of the Cimarron in order to be on with his purpose, he now could not wait calmly to see Cherry Maris in the hotel at some indefinite future hour, or perhaps never see her if Brule Garon's back-shooting bush-whackers should cut him down. In his reckless drive toward his single purpose, he almost brushed elbows with the man he most wanted to find and kill.

As he stepped out to the sidewalk and turned leftward to the door through which Cherry Maris had gone that afternoon, a group of eight or ten riders splashed up through the mud of the street and began dismounting before the hitch-poles there in front of the Oasis. Before Bob Fannin left the spot of reflected light there in front, one of Buffalo Judson's men, dismounting in the mud by the hitch-pole, recognised him and watched him until he had opened the side door of the building and disappeared within.

Judson had already barged into the Oasis, leading his men. The one who recognised Bob Fannin was the last to come in. It would be several minutes before he could make up his mind to interrupt Judson's and Garon's private talk in the latter's office to tell them that the young trail boss they had ruined was seen entering the dressing-rooms of the stage performers.

Bob stepped into complete darkness when he went through the door into the private stage entrance. He heard the murmur of voices at some distance in front of him, coming as if through thin walls. He began to feel his way ahead cautiously and almost immediately struck his boot toe against a step. Feeling his course out

more carefully with his hands before him, stooping over, he went up a flight of steps to a narrow passageway six feet above the level of the floor at the entrance. There was a wall on each side of him.

Down the narrow passage ahead he could hear the voices more distinctly now and saw the weak glow of light across the passage down there as if it came through slim cracks. He could not yet see the floor in front of him, but he hastened his advance, going noiselessly. A door was opened somewhere out of his vision and voices became louder. Light from the opened door spread over the end of the passage and he saw that there was a turn down there to the left. That would be near the stage.

He went forward more boldly, making no effort to muffle his tread. Passing a door in the flimsy partition from the cracks of which light seeped, he turned back to it and knocked lightly. A feminine voice answered. Steps pattered on the floor within and the door was opened. A young woman stood before him in the light of a lamp at one side of the small dressing-room.

"Oh!" the woman gasped after a quick glance at Bob, taking in his sagging guns. "Who—— Oh, you're the Texan! My God! What are you doing here?"

He recognised her then. She was the dark-haired girl who had been with Cherry Maris at sundown out there when the killers had started to shoot him in the back.

"I must see Cherry Maris quick," he told her. "Where is she?"

"Oh, great Heaven above, man, you'll get her into awful trouble! She's risked her life already twice for you this very night!"

"Why would she risk her life for me?" Bob asked, his heart beating faster. "She doesn't know me."

"She has talked about no other man for a whole year," the girl declared emphatically. "Since she stood in Wright and Beverley's last year and saw you kill those men who were tormenting Long John, she has talked about nothing else. She saw you in the Trail's End dining-room and you wouldn't even notice her when all other men go mad about her. She sang to you once in the Oasis and you got up and walked out like a big stick of wood. She was hurt by your indifference. Instead of hating you as I would do—as any other woman would do—she sees you kill men and can't quit talking about you! Why don't you go away from Dodge City and never come back—let her forget you? She's an angel. She's too good for a killer!"

"I've never killed anybody but them that was trying to kill me, girl. You don't hate me for that, or you wouldn't have told me so much that makes me plumb crazy happy. Where's Cherry Maris?"

She pointed at a door straight ahead where the passageway turned toward the stage.

"In that room," she said, "but knock before you go in. She may be dressing."

When he came to the indicated door, he saw a stairway at his right which evidently led down to a floor below, or to a rear door, and at his left he saw the stage where a man and woman were going through a dialogue act. He knocked on Cherry Maris's door and waited breathlessly for the result. A light step sounded within and a soft voice asked very close beyond the door panel: "Who is it?"

"Bob Fannin, from Texas, to see you, ma'm," he spoke just loud enough for her to hear through the thin door.

The door flew open instantly and Cherry Maris, still dressed in her fleecy white dress costume, stood before him. A short, choking gasp came from her partly open mouth. She recovered from her shock quickly and glanced first toward the stage, then at the stair-head leading below.

"Come in!" she pleaded, tensed with fear. She laid a warm little hand on his and pulled him into the room, closing the door behind him.

"Why have you come here?" she cried. Her hand still gripped tightly on his as she gazed up at him, her pretty lips twitching with the torture of her great anxiety.

The top of her plaited coils of golden hair would scarcely reach his chin.

He wanted to take her in his arms, but resisted the delicious temptation.

"I must find Buffalo Judson," he told her. "He killed my brother and run off my herd. They say you know him; that he tries to make love to you. Tell me where I can find him."

A look of repugnance darkened her lovely face then.

"Judson is worse than a beast!" she exclaimed. "But he is a terrible killer and always has his pack of beasts with him. You would have no chance alone fighting him——"

"Where is he?" Bob demanded, and for the first time he seized her hand, squeezing it until she winced with pain.

A LOOK of reproach came into her eyes.

"Why have you come to me asking for Buffalo Judson?" she asked, a feeling of deep hurt in her voice. "There are many people in Dodge City who could tell you as much as I could."

"I want to take you away from this, Cherry Maris," he said, a firm light of determination in his eyes, a new boldness urging him. "After I've killed the murderers of my brother and collected for the cattle they stole, I'm coming to take you and make you happy—if you'll let me."

"Oh, Bob Fannin! Bob Fannin!" she cried, gazing into his eyes as tears quickly came sparkling into her own. "Do you mean that? Do you really mean that you want me, Bob Fannin?"

"I've gone plumb teetotally locoed about you, girl," he said, with a fervour he had never before felt. "It's sure mighty sudden, just seeing you this evening for the first time, after you saved my life. You're the most wonderful, beautiful woman on earth, Cherry Maris. You've mighty near made me forget what I've got to do before I can stand up and show my face among men; that's how much I want you. But where can I find Buffalo Judson?"

"You're a hard man, Bob Fannin," she said, awe in her voice, her fascinated gaze studying his eyes. "You're hard and reckless. The look of the killer is in you now. I didn't want to love a killer!"

She spoke the last in a tone of vehement protest, holding to his arms.

"You wouldn't want to love a coward who runs from lobos that killed his brother and stole everything he's got. Where is Buffalo Judson?"

The grim manner of his repeated question beat upon her ears like the fearsome drums of war.

"If he took your herd as you say, he's driving it to Garon's Circle A down the Arkansas fifty miles from here, or has turned it over to men who will take it on there. I've heard them boast of taking other herds there. Judson will come in to collect half the value of the herd from Garon. Garon will sell the herd later and keep the rest of what it brings. You can't fight them alone, Bob. They have a hundred fast gunmen working for them."

His first name coming from her lips thrilled him, but he did not weaken.

"A thousand fast gun-fanners cain't stop lead that once gets on its way to Garon's and Judson's lousy hides. After I collect twenty-five thousand dollars from 'em for that herd and tan their hides, their gun-slingers might ground me, but that won't help them none."

"Then you do not care much whether you come back to me or not," she reproached him.

"If you want me to come back to you, Cherry Maris," he said fervently, drawing her within the clasp of his arms, drunk with his wild, new passion, "all the killers' bullets this side o' Mexico can't stop me."

"Last year after I saw you stop those rowdy jokers from shooting at Long John's feet, you stayed in Dodge for over a week and came just once to the Oasis, then ran out without looking at me when I came singing before your table. Three times I passed you at your table in the Trail's End dining-room and you never noticed me. I thought you hated me for being a singer in such a place. Now that you have come to me, Bob, I don't want

to lose you. If you go after those killers, I'll go with you. It would be worse than Indian torture to stay behind, waiting, waiting, not knowing what they had done to you. Maybe I can help—I could help you."

He looked at her, surprise overshadowing his happiness at her words.

"You mustn't do such a foolish thing, Cherry Maris," he said firmly. "You would slow me up—you'd get in the way."

"I can use a gun," she said, and showed him a double-barrelled little derringer under the draping lace of her left sleeve. "In this work a girl must learn to shoot if she would keep danger away. I've already had to let both Buffalo Judson and Brule Garon know that I carry this gun and that I would not hesitate to use it on them. I will help you, Bob."

Again he thrilled with a delightful tingle at sound of his name coming from her red, shapely lips. He suddenly wanted to kiss those lips. He drew her in a tight embrace, his strong arms encircling her warm, supple little body. She did not resist him, but cried out against the fierce pressure of his arms as he buried his face in her rich, perfumed hair. He bent his head farther and was seeking her lips when loudly spoken, angry words came through the thin walls to startle them.

"Brule Garon!" Cherry Maris gasped in a sudden agony of fear, struggling to free herself. "He is out there! He will find you here!"

He released her and she ran to the door of her dressing-room, listening close to it, her body tensed, her hands nervously clenched. She opened the door an inch and peered outward through the crack.

"Where's that damned Texas skunk?" Garon was shouting at someone out there. "He was seen coming in here from the front! Where is he, I say?"

Several frightened voices of men and women protested their lack of knowledge.

CHERRY MARIS closed her door and locked it. She rushed back to Bob Fannin, her face pallid with fear.

"Garon and several of his men are out there!" she whispered in feverish haste. "Buffalo Judson—— Oh, go—out this back way!" she urged, pulling him toward the back side of the room. She had started to tell him that Judson was out there, but remembered his reckless determination to find Judson and kill him. She feared to tell him then that his enemy was so near.

She opened a narrow door in the rear wall of her room.

"Hurry!" She tried to shove him out the door. "This runway goes to the back of the stage. In the stage centre, behind the back curtain that is always down, there's a trap-door—a ring in its centre—lift it, go down the steps. It's dark, but you'll find a door to the back yard. Go quick!"

She again tried to shove him on his way as Brule Garon shouted her name there by the front door of the room.

"Cherry Maris!" Garon bellowed in impatient rage, rattling the door-knob, "open this door! Why'd you lock it? Open, I tell you!"

Bob Fannin caught the golden-haired girl in his arms, crushed her to him and kissed her lips in one wild, deeply passionate kiss, then released her as suddenly as he had seized her. He slipped easily, speedily into the dark runway. She closed the door behind him at once and he heard her calling an answer to Brule Garon.

CHAPTER XI

AFTER the weakly reflected light of the girl's room behind him was cut off by the closing door, Bob Fannin had to feel his way ahead in the inky darkness. The shouting, stomping pandemonium a short distance away drowned the noise of his going and he

hurried along, trusting to the girl's directions.

With his left hand he felt the back stage curtain when he came to it. The space between it and the back wall was so narrow that his outstretched hands reached from one to the other. He remembered the approximate width of the stage. When he estimated that he had reached nearly to the half-way section, he dropped to his hands and knees, feeling for the ring of the promised trap-door.

He found it covered with a thin layer of dust, felt for the edge of the square cut in the floor to determine the position of the trap-door, found them and pulled hard on the ring. The piece of floor came up after little effort on his part.

Bob put his hands down to feel for the steps. They were covered with a thick coating of dust. He went down cautiously, one foot at a time on the narrow, insecure steps, and when he was far enough he let the trap-door back into place over his head. He heard a woman's frightened cry of protest over something, followed by a frantic scream, but it was not the voice of Cherry Maris.

He came to the bottom of the steps. When he stood up, his head almost touched the under-flooring of the stage. At his first slow step, he bumped against something which proved to be a broken chair sitting there awry in the dust. Before taking his next step, he heard the voice of Cherry Maris, muffled by the thin walls and flooring, but distinctly audible, nevertheless.

"Get back out of my room, Brule Garon, or I'll shoot!" the girl's voice threatened in coolly enunciated words that vibrated with deadly earnestness. "For the last time—get back!"

"Come on, Garon," a man's heavy voice advised. "That damned Texan ain't here. She helped 'im git away, o' course, but we can 'tend to the little spitfire later. I want the job o' tamin' her. Come on."

While Bob Fannin stood, listening breathlessly, he heard Garon mumbling some indistinct curses; then came a flood of heavy stomping and many men seemed to be moving away from that section where the dressing-rooms were. When the crowding steps were almost over Bob's head, there was a pause and Garon spoke again, hot rage in his tone.

"I want you men to get out and find that damned Texan," he ordered. "I deputise every one of you. Go out as deputy marshals; bring 'im in dead or alive. Most of you know him on sight. I'll show the sneaking skunk he can't bluff me and get away with it. Go on and do that while Judson and me's 'tending to this business, then you'll all get your share after we've settled on it. Get going!"

Bob Fannin's blood leaped at sound of Judson's name. The herd thief and murderer of Tom Fannin was right up there above him, with only thin wooden flooring separating them! And there was to be a settlement and a pay-off! The pay for his stolen herd, or that part of it claimed by the murderous rustlers!

He turned in the pitchy blackness of the place and searched his way through the cluttering rubbish of broken chairs and other objects, hunting for the door Cherry Maris said he would find in the back wall. While searching he heard two pair of feet coming down some steps beyond a wall on that side of his dark hiding-place nearest to the dressing-rooms above. He stopped and listened until he heard a door open and close behind the two men. Then he heard Garon's voice and that of the other. This other was the same as that which had advised Garon to leave Cherry Maris alone. It must certainly be that of Buffalo Judson. They were just beyond the wall, evidently in Garon's office there behind the rear end of the long bar.

Bob went closer until he touched the boards of the separating wall between him and his two worst enemies.

"Let me have that receipt now, Judson," Garon demanded.

"Here 'tis, Garon," came the response. "Your foreman's own tally. He took full charge o' the herd soon's we got 'em over the Cimarron 'cordin' to our agreement. We lost 'bout fifty, I 'spect, in the stam-

pedin' an' crossin' the river—mostly in the river. The river was sure bad, up outa the banks. 'Cordin' to our scouts there was three thousand in the herd. Pinky's count shows twenty-nine hundred and fifty, At five a head, that's fourteen thousand, seven hundred and fifty. Right?"

"Yeah, but how 'bout the horses?"

"Now, looky here, Garon! You said you wasn't interested in no more broncs. I'm gittin' together a few to run over west an' sell. What they bring won't amount to chicken feed for you."

"All right, Judson, all right," Garon replied placatingly. "How about the Slaughter herd that's coming up the Trail? 'Bout five thousand my scouts say. You better tackle 'em a little farther down the line this time, run 'em through the Nations, vent 'em on the way, graze 'em a bit and deliver 'em to my Ft. Scott man. The usual three-fourths for the longer drive and venting."

"Nothin' doin', Garon," Judson was emphatic. "You know them Gov'ment men are comin' in pretty damn' soon. We're runnin' on mighty thin ice right now an' it's gonna be a lot more onhealthy real soon. My men won't stick. They's better pickin's an' less danger out west. We're slopin', Garon."

"Sloping, hell! Just when the Fall drives are coming up the thickest and the people all around fooled easy and saying you fellers are doing good work keeping Texas tick fever out of Kansas? You're a fool to go getting cold feet now, Judson."

"I know when the quittin's good, Garon—me an' my men. Give me my share now an' pay up the other boys when they bring in that Texas coyote for you."

"I'll count it out and pay you all off together, so's there won't be any arguments."

THEIR talk of money convinced Bob Fannin that Garon had his stock of cash in his office. He began again to search for that rear door, a bold plan of action forming in his mind to collect for his herd. If only he could find a way into Garon's office before these other men returned!

He felt around the wall until he found the door. It was a little difficult to move the long-disused rusted bolt, but he finally opened it without much noise. It came open only part way, but far enough for him to squeeze himself through into the outside darkness. The door-sill was on a level with the ground. He went along the wall to his right and found a door that seemed to have been in more frequent and recent use.

This door opened easily to his touch and he immediately heard Garon's and Judson's voices still engaged in argument close by. A few slow, cautious steps along a little hallway toward the dimly lighted far end of the passage brought him even with the office door through which came sounds of the two voices he had followed. A bedlam of voices droned on and on in the big bar-room and dance-hall. Garon was counting something. Bob listened with his ear close to the door and quickly realised that the marshal was counting out money.

He opened the door with infinite, slow care, making not the slightest sound. He was half-way through the partly opened door when Garon and Judson, at the selfsame moment, seemed to become aware of the increased sound from outside and turned their heads. In the same second of fast action, Bob Fannin kicked the door closed behind him and lifted both of his guns.

Buffalo Judson, a big, heavy-shouldered, black-bearded man, wearing a broad-brimmed, flat-topped grey hat, with two guns at his hips, started to jump out of his chair as his hands moved toward his guns. Garon dropped sheaves of greenbacks from his hands and whirled around in his chair, facing Bob and cursing. He did not make a move for his gun, for he was quicker than Judson in seeing how dangerous that would be. Two gun-muzzles glowered upon him and Judson

like two black eyes of death.

"Steady, gents!" Bob warned just loud enough for them to hear in no mistakable murmur. "That's right, Judson! You're wise to leave them guns alone. Stand up, both of you, and turn your backs to me."

They did as directed. Bob holstered his left gun and then took the three hip guns from his prisoners; felt of their armpits to make sure of no hide-out guns. He stepped back and dropped the three guns in a far corner. He saw Garon's safe there within reach of where Garon had been sitting, but its door was closed. A considerable pile of paper money was on a little table between the chairs Garon and Judson had occupied,: a canvas sack lying beside the money.

He stepped close to Garon and poked his gun in the marshal's back.

"How much money in that bunch o' green-backs, Garon?" he asked.

"About twenty thousand dollars. Why, Texas? You taking to the owl-hoot trail now?"

"Not by a damn sight, Garon. I'm collecting for my cattle. I was lucky enough to be outside the wall and heard you two snakes arguing over the money for my herd. Glad you bought 'em, Garon. Saved me the trouble o' loading, and everything. Open that safe!"

"No use, Texas. There's no more money in there. It's all right here on the table."

"You're a liar, Garon. Open that safe."

He jabbed his gun-muzzle viciously into Garon's back. The marshal jumped a half step involuntarily, then bent down and opened the door of the safe after two or three twists of dials.

"Now take out ten thousand dollars more and put them with these on the table, Garon," Bob commanded. "Hurry up about it, 'cause if anybody comes in this door back of me before we finish this little chore, it'll be yours and Judson's quick sentence of death."

"I tell you, there's no more——"

"Are you choosing quick death, Garon, or you gonna pay me the rest of my cattle?"

Garon had turned and was looking into the young Texan's cold, grey eyes. He saw something there and felt something more in that brittle voice which changed his mind for him in a hurry. He turned back to the safe and pulled out another canvas sack.

He started to take some packages of bills from the sack.

"Leave 'em in it," Bob commanded, "and keep your back to me, Judson. I'm not so busy with Garon that one good eye isn't on you. Give me that sack, Garon, and put that money there on the table in that other sack and hand it over."

"I thought you wanted only thirty thousand, Texas. Take the thirty thousand and we'll call it a square deal and no questions later. You can leave town safe."

"How much in them two piles, altogether?" Bob asked.

"Thirty-five thousand."

"Three thousand longhorns that my bosses wanted ten dollars a head for, and five thousand for my cavvy of forty-two damn good cow ponies. The broncs I took from your camp on the Cimarron are south Texas mustangs that you stole from trail crews. They'll have to be turned over to their owners——"

He was interrupted by steps that came toward the door along the passage from the bar-room. Bob slipped over to the side of the room where he would be behind the opening door. His gun-muzzles pointed at the two men before him. Garon's face went white. Buffalo Judson squirmed, trembling, and turned his head over his beefy shoulders to look, wide-eyed, toward Bob. Garon made a funny gasping noise and bellowed loudly as the party outside came within two steps of the door.

"Don't come in here yet!" he shouted. "Stay outa here till we're through."

"All right, Mr. Garon," a quaking voice replied. "I jest wanted to tell yuh

we cain't find no sign o' that Texas feller, but there's this other'n out here with Luke Short and that Bat Masterson feller. Want us to take him?"

"Yeah—no! Leave 'im till I come out. Go on away now!"

The hasty steps fading away outside relieved the two fearful men inside. They visibly relaxed. Brule Garon dashed sweat from his forehead with a nervous hand.

"Sack that loose money, quick, Garon, and tie the two sacks together, tight," Bob commanded, with haste in his voice.

WITH hands that fumbled in fear, Garon stuffed the loose greenbacks in the sack and quickly had two two sacks tied together with the loose ends of the strings that were already on each sack.

"Toss 'em over here," Bob ordered when the tying was done.

The sacks were dropped at his feet. He moved them around beside the door with a foot, then walked sideways over to the corner where he had put his prisoners' guns. He again holstered his left gun, and with a boot toe he separated one of the three guns in the corner and kicked it sliding across the floor toward Brule Garon. It stopped sliding when it struck Garon's feet. Again Bob's expertly working toe angled another gun out and kicked it within stooping reach of Buffalo Judson. The latter was glaring, wonderingly, at Bob, looking sideways to do so.

"Now," the hard-voiced youth said, "you two slimy-bellied side-winders are gonna give me a chance to finish collecting the debt. I've got the money for my bosses that you owed for the cattle you stole. If you stop me from collecting the rest of the debt, you'll still have the cow money. I thought at first I'd make sure of the money and get it on the way to my bosses, but I mightn't then ever have another such good chance to collect what you owe me, and that's a whole lot bigger debt than you owe for the cows. I'm collecting my debt right now, too. Listen close.

"When the first shot is fired back here, your stinking lobos outside there'll come a-helling to see, so this's got to be done mighty quick in here. You reach for your gun first, Garon. I'll wait till you come up straight with it. I'll keep my gun down straight toward the floor beside my leg this way till you start lifting your gun. If you start lifting yours 'fore you get straightened up, that's your look-out. If I win this toss with you, Garon, Judson'll have to go for his gun mighty quick, and go through the same motions I've told you, otherwise——"

"Why d'you wanta kill us, Texas?" Buffalo Judson asked, shaken. "We ain't done nothin' but take your cows that was filled with ticks, an' you've got high pay for 'em. You ain't got no call for killin' us."

"Brule Garon's backing you, Judson, and you murdered two o' my men in that raid on my herd, one of 'em my kid brother. We buried 'em out there by the Cimarron, and I swore over their graves that I'd collect for 'em. Grab your gun, Garon!"

Again came sound of steps outside, just as Garon tensed himself, a cunning, beady look in his black eyes as he watched Bob Fannin.

"Hold it!" Bob motioned with his gun. Garon straightened and listened.

"Hey, Brule!" a man called through the door. "When're you commin' out? A whole passle o' Luke Short's crowd is comin' in. Somethin's in the wind. You better slide outa there damn quick!"

Bob Fannin saw Garon's eyes dart down to the gun at his feet a fleeting second before the cat-like movement of his body. Garon bent his whole body in a squatting position, grabbed his gun and was lifting it in a treacherous effort to outwit Bob Fannin. The man's whole movement was executed with such agile speed that Bob barely had time to leap sideways and fire as Garon's shot mixed

thunder with him. A roaring explosion seemed to tear the low-roofed little office room wide open.

The next second Bob was sure that the explosion had actually ripped the walls out. As he watched Brule Garon throw himself backward from his squatting position and fall, instantly limp and motionless upon the floor, a terrific crashing and splintering of wood smote the youth's ears. He looked for Buffalo Judson, gun ready for a quick second shot. The whole right-hand side of the flimsily partitioned office seemed to be moving outward. A big hole where a large section of the thin boards had been smashed out, showed where the tremendous bulk of Buffalo Judson had gone through in his frenzied dive for safety, battering a passage with his elephantine shoulders.

Bob knew that he had but slim seconds in which to get out before the whole pack of Garon gunmen in the bar-room would be upon him. Five seconds after the deadening roar of the two shots he was on his way. With left hand he seized the sacks of money, jerked the door open and looked out into the little hallway. A gun belched flame and thunder from out there ten feet away; a bullet splintered the door facing at his left in line with his peering eyes. Bob returned the shot instantly as he snapped backward a step.

He realised that he was hemmed in. He turned in one leap to blow out the lamp burning on Garon's little table. As he blew violently into the chimney of the lamp, his eyes had their last view of the ghastly, distorted pale face of Brule Garon sprawled there dead before his safe. Many shots and a tumultuous roar of cursing, shouting men and screaming women broke forth in the bar-room then. Bullets smacked viciously through the walls of the office room.

Bob saw that many men were converging on him, firing through the open door and the torn part of the wall where Judson had ignominously burst out to safety. Gun thunder and the spanking of lead on wooden panels dinned in his ears.

CHAPTER XII

As Bob Fannin crouched in Brule Garon's demolished, splintered office, searching the best way out from the hail of lead, the thought uppermost in his mind, even above the thought of that sack of money in his left hand, was of Buffalo Judson and how to get sight of that murderer again. It seemed that all of the guns out there were directed at his hiding-place aimed at killing him.

A bullet zipped through his hat crown, almost jerking the hat from his head; another kicked at his left side, burning his flank just above the hip. He moved, crouching, toward the wide opening Buffalo Judson had left. Through the opening he saw the short stairway which led up to the dressing-rooms.

Gathering every atom of strength for the quickest leap and run of which he was capable, he bounded through the opening in the wall, heading for the stairway. He went out with uplifted gun. His first flashing glance on passing through showed him a man on bent knees by the outside of the long bar's end pouring shots at his recent sanctum of little safety. His first shot knocked the fellow over.

A zipping missle cut the sack of money out of his hand. In the same second his darting glance took in an amazing sight behind the long bar and across the wide room. Sam Lucas, Bat Masterson and Luke Short crouched behind the bar at equal distances from each other, throwing over shots at targets across and around the room. Bob had a blurring vision of prostrate bodies lying in there behind the bar and all out across the dance floor. He jerked his left-hand gun and started pumping lead at a bunch of thirty or forty men who were retreating across

the room and on to the stage. They were firing back at Bob's friends behind the bar and toward other men at the front door and windows.

Bob zig-zagged and leaped across the end of the low passage which led back to Garon's office door and the rear yard. His darting eyes were searching for one big, beefy figure among those many beyond the orchestra den and upon the stage. Some were in headlong flight across the stage for the safety of the exits. None was anyone resembling the black-bearded murderer of his brother.

He heard a step immediately behind him and whirled, crouching, thumbing back the hammer of his right-hand gun. He recognised Stokey Morrison, saw the yawning muzzle of a .45 aimed at him so close that it could not miss, but he held his own thumb from the fatal release of hammer. A fraction of a second before he would have released that hammer he saw a gigantic dark figure bulge up out of the passageway over Stokey Morrison. A powerful hand flashed downward across Morrison's wrist and crashed the exploding gun to the floor. The next instant Stokey Morrison was seized in the hands of the mighty Cherokee giant, Long John.

During the next two flicking seconds of time, Bob Fannin saw such a sight as he never again would willingly elect to see.

Long John swept down as he knocked the gun from Morrison's hand and seized the would-be killer of his young friend by both ankles with powerful, long-fingered hands that seemed like the prehensile, irresistible hands of a gorilla. He swung the helpless, screaming Judson henchman backward and then over his own tall head. With a swoosh and loud thud he brought Morrison down upon the hard dance floor, flattening his head as if a steam-roller had passed over it.

Bob turned away from the sickening sight and saw the horror and rage on a dozen faces of Garon gunmen there upon the stage above him. They had seen the incredible feat of the Indian giant and, gathering their petrified wits to life again, lifted guns to cut down the big Indian. Bob did not have time to both warn Cherokee Long John and shoot the menacing enemies.

He threw himself with all his might against Long John, staggering the behemothian figure back into the screening protection of the narrow hallway.

"Look out, Long John!" he yelled. "Get back! They're trying to kill you! You have no gun to fight 'em!"

"Long John don't need gun," the Indian answered. "Come. We kill 'em all."

He started out upon the floor, but Bob caught his arm and jerked at his ponderous frame.

"No, Long John! Come back and help me find Buffalo Judson," Bob pleaded.

"Judson come while you turn your face that way to shoot them," Long John declared, waving his hand to indicate the wide floor and the stage, "and take white sacks from floor by 'em go-up to where white girls put on pretty dresses. He run quick back the go-up, I come so to tell you, see man hold gun to kill you——"

Bob had turned at Long John's mention of the sacks to look frantically for them where they had been shot from his grasp. Seeing nothing of them between the foot of the steps and the partly demolished wall of Garon's office where they had fallen, he broke the Indian's laconic speech.

"Come on, Long John!" he cried, seizing the Indian's long arm. "Our friends've got these coyotes whipped. They're throwing down their guns up there on the stage." He jerked Long John toward the short flight of steps which the Indian called the "go-up." "We've gotta catch Judson—he's got our money in them bags."

He turned loose the Indian's arm and dashed up the stairs, leaving Long John to follow at his heels. Before Bob reached the top step he heard the frenzied screams of a woman ahead of him. He dashed toward the hallway leading to the front between the dressing-rooms. When he leaped around the corner into the hallway, his eyes darting and searching everywhere for Buffalo Judson, he crashed into

a young woman who ran out as he turned the corner.

The force of their collision knocked the girl backwards prostrate upon the floor, cutting off a screaming cry for help into a muffled moan. Bob bent down and lifted the groaning girl to her feet. She looked dazedly into his eyes as he shouted at her. She was the one who had directed him to Cherry Maris.

"What's the matter, girl?" he cried. "Where's Buffalo Judson? Have you seen him pass up here?"

"Oh, God, yes!" she gasped, her eyes wide with terror. "That's what I was trying to tell you. He's got Cherry Maris—taking her away on them horses out front! I tried to hold her from being put on the horse—they knocked me down. They're——"

"Which way did he go?" Bob interrupted, with a shout as he shook the girl's shoulders.

"They're just leaving now," she replied, with hoarse vehemence, pointing toward the front. "Run—catch 'em—save Cherry Maris from that devil!"

BOB was speeding along the narrow hallway to the darkened front end before the girl finished speaking. Long John ran with silent steps behind him.

Out upon the muddy sidewalk, with the reflected lights of the saloon revealing them, Bob saw four horses dashing away toward the west end of town, spattering mud madly as they went. With a chill of horror he could distinguish the burly form of Buffalo Judson on the leading horse and saw the struggling, tangled shape of Cherry Maris held helpless in front of the outlaw.

Four horses remained standing at a hitch-rack west of the entrance to the saloon. Bob ran toward them. As he and Long John leaped from the board-walk into the mud beside the horses, two of the escaping Garon gunmen dashed out of the darkness beside the building. They followed Bob and Long John toward the horses, obviously mistaking them in the half-light for other Garon henchmen running from the blazing guns inside.

Bob had one foot in the stirrup on a horse he had just untied when the two new-comers lunged in beside him and began hastily untying two of the horses. The young Texan mounted and swung his excited horse around beside the nearest of the then mounting outlaws. He lifted his right-hand gun to smash the fellow's skull, but held his blow. The man was speaking hastily as he leaped into the saddle.

"We gotta clear outa this place quick, fellers," he was saying. "Garon's dead—Buffalo's headin' yonder for the up-river camp. He's the big chief now. Let's ketch 'im!"

Bob held his gun half poised for a second or two, then shoved it back into the holster. Judson was already out of sight down the dark, muddy street. Apparently, according to this scared gunman, Judson was not headed for the Cimarron camp where Bob had thought he would go. On the instant Bob decided to use these two men as long as they did not recognise him and Long John in the darkness. The big Indian had swung his horse out into the street, away from the lights. Bob held his horse in until the two gunmen were astride and kicking their mounts into a quick start. He rode along near the fellow who had spoken, but a little behind him. Long John urged his pony in beside Bob as the youth spoke.

"All right, pardner," he agreed. "You ride point on this herd. We'll drag close on your tails."

The two scared outlaws were too intent on leaving Dodge City in a hurry to suspect that the two riders following close on their heels were any others than their comrades in crime. They spurred their jumping horses into a furious, mud-splashing race out toward Bodine's livery stable and the river beyond. Long John rode beside Bob without a word. The youth hoped the Indian would understand his strategy. He could not risk talking loud enough to tell him. The two other men rode close to each other just ahead.

One of them spoke to the other, but in the noise of four horses' pounding hoofs, Bob could not understand the words. He wondered if the two would suspect his and Long John's identity before they led them to Judson's "up-river" camp.

As the four horses raced past Bodine's livery stable, Bob wished that he could stop and change to his big black racer, but had to plunge onward, trusting to the smaller unknown under him. With these two outlaws ahead to guide him, it was not so necessary to overtake Judson until the latter stopped at his camp. Then it would have to be a matter of wit and gunpowder to overcome the enormous odds against him and Long John.

They reached the point just north of the river where a trail turned off at right angles from the wider, more clearly-marked cattle drive trail coming from the river ford. Without hesitation, the two men ahead turned off along that indistinct trail. Bob and Long John followed them and soon found their ponies running on firmer, grass-covered ground just above the bluffs that rimmed the river lowlands.

The two men ahead seemed to be conferring again, riding very close together until their stirrups touched. Bob watched them keenly, able only to make out their shadowy forms above their running horses. Their words came in an incomprehensible mumble. After a little they rode apart again and slowed down until the youth and Indian came within one-horse length behind them. The fellow who had spoken first at the hitchrack in town now shouted back at Bob.

"You fellers ever been to this camp up-river?" he asked.

"Naw," Bob replied at once. "Buffalo took us on at the Cimarron camp few days back. Told us to come on and wait in Dodge."

"Hell, that's funny," the fellow shouted, while Bob's spine chilled with suspense. "Musta been while we was scoutin' the Fannin herd. 'S funny he didn't take you in on the Fannin grab, 'cause we needed more men. We lost a man in that ruckus. Who's the other guy with you?"

"This is Silent Hopper," Bob lied glibly. "Used to ride with Quantrel. Lost half his tongue to a bullet once. You heard o' Silent, haven't you?"

"Hell, yes! Hello, Silent! I sure have heard a heap about you. Guess, if my tongue'd been shot out, I wouldn't be so gabby. I wanta shake hands with Silent Hopper?"

He drew up suddenly on his reins. Bob put his hand out to signal Long John and stopped his horse suddenly.

"Look!" he cried. "Isn't that Judson and the others up yonder ahead?"

The fellow who had started to stop looked forward quickly, peering into the darkened distance. The other man slowed down fifteen or twenty paces away and was also studying the trail ahead.

"I don't see nothin'," the first speaker said, and let his pony go on at a trot to follow the other man. "You see 'em, Ducky?"

"Naw," the man in front called back, "but we ain't fur from the camp. Let's amble on. Buffalo'll be there all right. I hope that gal he had in front o' him' as he run off was Cherry Maris. She can sing me to sleep any time she wants to."

The outlaw who had wanted to shake hands with "Silent Hopper" apparently had forgotten his desire and rode on again at a gallop, following his companion's lead.

"You ain't gittin' foolish ideas, I hope, Ducky," he said. "Buffalo ain't gonna let Cherry sing to nobody but him, now that Garon's outa the way." He turned his head and called over his shoulder to Bob. "You fellers git a eyeful o' Cherry Maris?"

"Which one was she?" Bob asked innocently. "The red-headed singer?"

"Hell, you sure must be new to this

here country if you don't know Cherry Maris. Sure that was her, only her hair ain't so red. It's like sunset gold."

"Shut up, Soapy," the forward man ordered. "You talk too damn' much, 'specially about Cherry Maris. If Buffalo hears you gabbin' about her, he'll poke you full o' lead pills."

"You was jest doin' some ravin' about her, yourself," Soapy reminded the man whom he called Ducky. "Better keep your own biscuit winder from yappin' so much about Cherry. The camp's jest under them higher bluffs yonder, down 'mongst them cotton-wood trees."

All four horsemen rode on at a gallop. After a quarter of a mile the trail turned leftward and down through a break in the high, steep bluff. A noisy stream ran down the cut from the rain-soaked prairie. At times the riders had to force their mounts to follow the middle of the shallow water because of the lack of footing between the walls of the cut. Bob followed the two outlaws; Long John brought up the rear, keeping close to Bob's horse. It was so dark the youth had to let his pony find his way stumblingly over rocks in the noisy little stream.

A sharp voice called out from the darkness just ahead of the leading rider, Ducky, demanding who these riders were.

"It's me and Soapy and two other fellers," Ducky answered, very close to the challenger. "One o' the other fellows is Silent Hopper."

"Silent Hopper!" the challenger exclaimed in an incredulous tone. "Silent Hopper was s'posed to've been killed in Ft. Scott two months ago. Is it sure 'nough you, Silent?"

Bob's horse was finding difficulty in his footing among the rounded brook rocks. He staggered and lunged into a large, saddle-high boulder just as the last question was asked. The youth leaped off the saddle and slid over the top of the big rock. He heard Long John emit a deep bass grunt and start his horse onward to approach the men in front.

While the cunning Cherokee was urging his struggling pony past Bob's abandoned pony, making much fuss in his progress, Bob picked his way over and between a jumble of rocks and shrubs toward the sentry. The young Texan had to pass very close to Soapy and Ducky, but the impenetrable darkness of the gorge and Long John's noisy advance hid his movements.

At the instant when Bob was measuring the distance to where he thought the night guard stood, a light flared up almost in his face. The sentry had struck a match to an oil-soaked bullrush torch, holding it above a big rock behind which he stood.

Bob dropped instantly behind the rock. A choking cry behind him and a loud yell from Ducky made him turn his head as he fell from partial shadow. He saw the mighty right arm of Long John encircling Soapy's throat, saw the futile struggle of the terrified outlaw to throw off the strangling grip of the giant as the Indian lifted him from the saddle. Then, all in the same flashing second of time, Bob saw Ducky lifting his gun to fire at the Cherokee and heard the shouted words of recognition from the sentry.

"It's Long John and the damn' Texan, Bob Fannin!" the sentry shouted right over Bob's head.

CHAPTER XIII

THE shouted words of the sentry were scarcely out of his mouth when a six-gun poked over the top of the rock and downward. It blazed with an agonising explosion so close to Bob's face that the powder flame singed cheek and neck of the dodging youth. The bullet ripped down his pants' leg, burning his knee painfully.

Bob was springing away as the gun roared in his face and his own gun was coming up as he sprang backward. He did not offer his first lead to the man trying to kill him, but gave his quickly-thrown shot to Ducky. The latter had

gun levelled at Long John, but seemed hesitant until he could fire without hitting his friend, Soapy. The glare of the oil torch made the scene as clear as that deep gulch could ever be at high noon.

Bob saw the tensing of Ducky's hand and arm for the shot as he lifted his own gun and thumbed back its hammer. At the explosion of the shot Ducky jerked over and fell on the off-side of his staggering, excited horse. The bright glare of the torch flashed down to Bob's feet. The man behind the rock had tossed the flaming bunch of bull-rush reeds over the rock.

The young Texan was quick enough to outwit the sentry, for he knew that a bullet would instantly follow the torch. Before the latter touched the ground at his feet, he leaped to the right around the side of the shouder-high boulder which shielded the torch thrower. His jump was not a half second too soon. A bullet flattened against the stone back of his head as he moved toward his enemy.

The sentry fell back off the top of the big rock as Bob leaped in behind him. In the flickering reflection of light coming over the top of the stone barrier the two men aimed gun muzzles at each other, But Bob Fannin's agile right thumb worked a second sooner than the clumsier thumb of his antagonist. The outlaw's gun dropped, unfired, from his limp hand as he stumbled forward and fell beside his killer.

Bob snatched up the dead man's gun and rushed back around the rock toward Long John. He was just in time to see the big Cherokee toss the seemingly lifeless body of Soapy to the ground beside the rushing stream waters. The Indian still sat in his saddle, his dark, sphinx-like face expressionless except for the lively glitter of his black eyes. He had obviously choked Soapy until he no longer felt the pulse of life in his throat, then tossed him contemptuously aside.

It was impossible to know just how close they were to the camp of Buffalo Judson, but Bob Fannin felt sure that the shots of this encounter had been heard in the camp below. The sentry would not have been placed out of hearing from the camp.

The fallen torch was still throwing a bright glare over the death scene as Bob rushed back to Long John and shoved his captured gun up at the Cherokee.

"Take this gun, Long John!" he cried cautiously. "You'll need it. We'll have to fight from here on!"

"I have two hands," the Indian replied calmly, gesturing slightly to show his powerful hands. "Long John fight better with hands. Guns make 'em hands soft, like woman."

He stopped speaking for a second and held up a hand for silence, then continued.

"Other white men come," he said and waved toward the river bottoms, "want to know why shoot-shoot here. Jump on horse quick."

Bob heard the sound of men's voices now in the new silence. He ran to his horse and seized the reins, pulling the animal urgently out on the narrow space of level ground behind the big rocks. There he tied the reins to a tough scrub oak, asking Long John to do the same with his horse. When the Cherokee had dismounted and tied his horse without a word of questioning. Bob seized the bull-rush torch and threw it into the little flooded stream, casting the surroundings again into pitchy darkness.

The young Texan then led Long John in a hasty, nearly noiseless descent from the gorge. The spot where they had been challenged was less than twenty steps from the bottom of the bluff, where the ground levelled off toward the wide and swollen Arkansas River. The light of a few stars showing through broken spots in the clouds overhead revealed some clumps of trees scattered out across the river bottoms.

The two men afoot turned to the right at the mouth of the gorge and fell in behind some bushes. Horses came toward the gorge from the direction of the river and the sound of a man's voice showed

that those horses had riders. Then they came into view a few steps away where they halted. There were two of them.

"It's gone all quiet ag'in," one of the riders said in a low, fearful voice. "Reckon we'd orta go up the crack and see?"

"Call Gibby first," the other man ordered in a hoarse, whispering voice.

"Hey, Gibbons! You there?" the first speaker yelled.

All was silence then except for one of the horses which pawed the ground impatiently. Bob knew that it would be but a few minutes before these two henchmen of Buffalo Judson would learn the truth and flee back to warn the abductor of Cherry Maris. That might give the outlaw leader time to get a new start and make good his escape, taking the girl with him. In his desperation Bob lifted his guns, one in each hand, ready to kill from ambush for the first time in his life. He could see the outlines of the two riders clearly ten steps away. Then a startling, unexpected thing happened.

WITHOUT a word one of the tense, listening outlaws, jerked suddenly and violently on his mount's bits and kicked his spurs into the poor beast's flanks with vicious force. In a flash both men had turned about and were thundering out across the grassy river land.

"Quick, Long John!" Bob cried as he sprang up. "Let's get our horses!"

He started back towards the gorge, but Long John seized his arm and held him as he spoke.

"No," he said. "I see light between trees that make little house show. We run; we ketchum quick before they know we come."

Without waiting for Bob's assent to his suggestion, Long John sped away at a swift run in pursuit of the fleeing riders. Bob Fannin was a good runner himself, but he now soon found himself putting forth every ounce of his speed to keep up with the nimble giant.

The two fleeing riders could be seen as flitting shadows running around a thick grove of cottonwood-trees. Long John led Bob straight into the grove. There was no undergrowth. The flicker of light which Long John had seen from farther away was showing now between the tall, limbless trunks of trees. As Bob ran between the trees, close on Long John's heels, he could see that the light was framed in the small square of a window. It was the little house Long John's keen eyes had recognised.

Half-way through the grove the two runners came up to a corral pole fence. Many horses were visible within the large enclosure, especially beyond the trees and nearer to the house. Bob guessed this was a winter camp, an excellent place of shelter during winter storms.

There were already sounds of excited voices and much hasty stirring and running about the house. The Cherokee turned right to follow the pole fence around back of the house, in the opposite direction from which the two riders had approached. It seemed to Bob Fannin that the big corral extended to an interminable distance that way. He seized the Cherokee's arm and spoke hurriedly.

"I see them taking Cherry Maris out of the house, Long John," he declared. "I'm going straight through the corral. No time to lose. They're going to run away with her."

"Maybe man-killer horse in corral," Long John warned, "but I go with you. Come!"

He was climbing nimbly over the poles as he finished speaking. Bob dropped to the ground inside the corral as Long John's moccasined feet padded noiselessly upon the soft earth. They sped across toward the house, side by side. Horses shied at them and dropped away from their path. Out from under the trees, they saw the wide swing gate at the far side of the corral, nearest to the house and only twenty or thirty steps from the latter.

There was a generous stream of light pouring from a front door of the house now. Men could be seen leading horses

up in that light. Two were already mounted. Two more on the ground were forcing Cherry Maris toward a saddled horse, the bridle reins of which were held by one of the mounted men. One of the men on the ground who held the girl was unmistakably Buffalo Judson.

"Go open the corral gate, Hawks," Buffalo Judson ordered the man holding the girl's other arm. "Let the broncs loose. I'll put Cherry on her saddle. Hurry up."

Bob was stooped over and slipping through between lower poles of the fence at one side of the gate. Long John followed him through the opening and ran with the youth across to the darker shadows of the house wall. A light still shone inside the small, four-cornered cabin. Bob was anxious to place all his enemies and count their number before he attacked. He peered through one side of a small window.

Empty bunks were visible around the far side of the cabin, but no one was inside. The man Hawks, who had been ordered to open the corral gate, was coming past the front corner of the cabin as Bob ducked back from the pale light of the window.

"Hey, Buffalo!" Hawks yelled in sudden terror. "Look out!"

The frightened outlaw jumped toward the front of the house and fired at the indistinct shadows he saw near the window. Bob had seen the quick draw of gun and instantly shoved Long John outward as he snatched his own gun and dropped to a knee, stooping low. He fired at the plainly-visible form of Hawks as a bullet glanced off the wall near his head and sang a quick, vicious song off among the trees back of the cabin.

Hawks dropped, full length, in front of the cabin, only his feet and legs visible to Bob Fannin. The youth leaped forward to the corner and saw that Judson had already forced Cherry Maris into the saddle.

"Take her away—run for it—we'll settle this and follow!" Judson was shouting up at the man who held the girl's horse.

THE man on the horse spurred his mount and jerked Cherry's horse for a quick start. Bob lifted his gun and steadied his hand against the corner of the house for a careful aim at the man taking the girl away. At the moment he fired, his target was pulled suddenly backward in his saddle as Cherry Maris's horse lunged sideways, rebelling against the hard jerk on reins.

Bob knew that his shot had missed the instant that flame poured from his gun-muzzle. He saw the other mounted man jumping his horse forward and heard the roar of the fellow's gun, then saw a big shadow dart out from behind and streak for the charging horseman as splinters stung his face. A bullet had cut close to him on the house corner.

He dropped lower and fired again at the man who tried to force the girl's horse into flight. Buffalo Judson was lifting his gun to strike the horse's rump. Cherry Maris was leaning forward in a vain effort to take the reins of her mount away from the man who held them. Bob's second shot missed. In reckless desperation, he ran out toward the struggling trio. A hasty glance to his left showed Long John in that instant leaping up to seize the third man in his saddle. He had no time to follow the Cherokee's strangely terrible manner of fighting. He could only hope that the gunman on horseback would not plant a bullet in the big Indian before Long John could get his mighty hands on the killer's throat.

Buffalo Judson did not bring his lifted gun down upon the balky horse's rump, but turned it quickly upon Bob as the youth sped out for a closer, surer shot at the man holding the reins of Cherry's horse. At last that horse was giving up his rebellion and now started forward, carrying Cherry away. Judson's shot cut with a deadening kick into Bob's side. The desperate youth staggered on and lifted his gun within ten feet of the mounted man. He fired and dropped sud-

denly to hands and knees to dodge Judson's second shot.

The man on the horse reeled in the saddle of his rearing horse, turned loose the other horse's reins and sagged out of his seat. Bob turned his gun then upon Buffalo Judson. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber. He threw the gun away and drew his second weapon.

A choked, terrified scream drew his attention for a half-second's glance toward Long John and the man whom the Indian had pulled from his saddle. The short, blurred glance revealed the Cherokee's big arms about the man from behind, his hands closed in a throttling, killing grip on the fellow's throat.

Cherry Maris was again trying to reach the dangling reins of her horse and pull them up over the animal's head. She had just succeeded in her attempt when Buffalo Judson darted in behind her horse from Bob and climbed up behind the girl. The horse started to trot away, carrying the outlaw leader and his captive. Cherry tried vainly to get out of the saddle, but one big arm closed about her.

Bob Fannin realised with a flash of hot fury that the bearded killer of his brother was about to escape him again, taking Cherry Maris out of his sight once more. He could not risk shooting at him so close to the girl. Judson had holstered his own guns in his effort to mount and get away. The youth threw his gun to the ground and took four long running steps toward the escaping outlaw, then leaped upward at him, grasping at the beefy shoulders and neck with both hands.

They slid off over the rump of the frightened horse and fell to the ground in a fighting tangle. Judson was screaming throaty yells of rage while Bob's left arm encircled his throat from behind, choking him. When they hit the ground, Judson was on top, but Bob had the advantage of hold and quickly clenched the big man's middle with his long, powerful legs in a scissors hold. With his free right hand he fished his jack-knife from a pocket and started to open the blade with his teeth. Judson's fierce struggles made it difficult. Then the outlaw got his right hand to his holstered gun and drew it. Bob saw the big-bored six-gun poking back for a blind shot at his head.

He dropped his knife and seized the gun. He heard Cherry Maris scream, but could not glance away to see what bothered her. He felt sickened from the wound in his side, felt his strength ebbing. It brought a greater desperation of effort into his straining muscles, but he could not seem to hurt the big man with his one-arm hold.

The outlaw was poking his gun with deadly precision at his face for a close, sure shot, in spite of the young Texan's weakened attempt to shove it away. Bob got his thumb in front of the cocked hammer, but he could not wrench the weapon from Judson's powerful hand with just one hand. He suddenly turned loose his throat hold on the big man and grasped the gun with both hands. With a quick, strong twist, he jerked the gun loose as Judson threw himself over, free from the scissors hold, and snatched at his left-side gun.

Both men were lying nearly prostrate on the ground, upraised only on one elbow, as they brought guns to bear on each other. Bob released the hammer and in the same instant that he became aware of the twin flames of the guns so close, he felt a dull pain in his right side and a nauseating loss of breath.

WOUNDED now in both sides and half dazed by this second, more severe wound, he saw the bearded, pain-wracked face of Buffalo Judson fall to the ground, then saw the fellow turn half over on his side and lift his gun for another shot. Bob's right arm feel numb, but he wabbled the gun in his hand for a last desperate shot, trying to beat his enemy to the shot.

His thumb was too weak to press the powerful hammer back. He waited for Judson's shot, then knew that the outlaw was also unable to cock his hammer for the fatal explosion. Judson's eyes seemed to go blank, his tongue dangled

crazily out upon the black beard under his lip, then he slumped to the ground and lay very still there in the streaming light from the cabin.

Cherry Maris fell down beside Bob, crying a barrage of excited questions. He let her help him to his feet. His right side felt as if it had been torn away from him, for it had no feeling. He dropped Judson's gun from his numbed right hand and with left hand felt of his wounded side. Blood already had his side warmly wet.

"Are you badly hurt, Bob?" Cherry Maris cried, watching his movements with an agony of suspense in her face. "Oh, Bob, you're shot—you're bad hurt —come in the house. Long John, come here and help me get him inside!"

She cried her appeal to the big Indian who left a dead man beside the house wall and came toward the girl and youth. It was obvious that Long John had only that moment finished his own struggle with the last of Judson's men and it was also plain that he had killed his antagonist in the manner he liked best, with his own bare hands. That fearful struggle must have been what brought the terrified scream from Cherry Maris, Bob thought.

It was thirty minutes later before Long John had cut a bullet from the back of Bob's right side. The other wound in the flank of his left side was clean. The bullet had gone through, but Bob was weakened by the loss of blood. Long John bound up the wounds and then brought in the sacks of money that Judson had dropped on the ground. He laid them on the bunk beside the wounded youth, while Cherry Maris sat on the edge of the bunk, tears of joy in her eyes.

"Long John have not much fun," the Indian said, looking moodily down at his young friend, "but to-night I have very, very much joy because I pay back a debt to very good friend. You make ketchy-ketchy love talk while I go make travois, take you easy to 'em white medicine man in Dodge."

Bob would have spoken his gratitude, but the tall Cherokee turned and stalked out, bending his great head low to pass through the door. Cherry Maris followed him with eyes that were full of tears. Her pretty red lips quivered in her efforts to control her feelings.

"He is a wonderfully strange, good man," she said huskily.

"Yes," Bob agreed, squeezing her small. soft hand, thrilled by its warmth, "but I still think you're the most wonderful, most beautiful woman in all the world, Cherry. I can go back to Texas now with a clear record. Will you marry me in Dodge and go south with me?"

"Oh, Bob," she cried impulsively and leaned over to kiss him. "I would go to the ends of the earth with you."

He held her closely and patted her shoulder gently, wondering if he was the same man who had spoken harshly to his men a few nights back about their foolish raving over the beauty of this same Cherry Maris.

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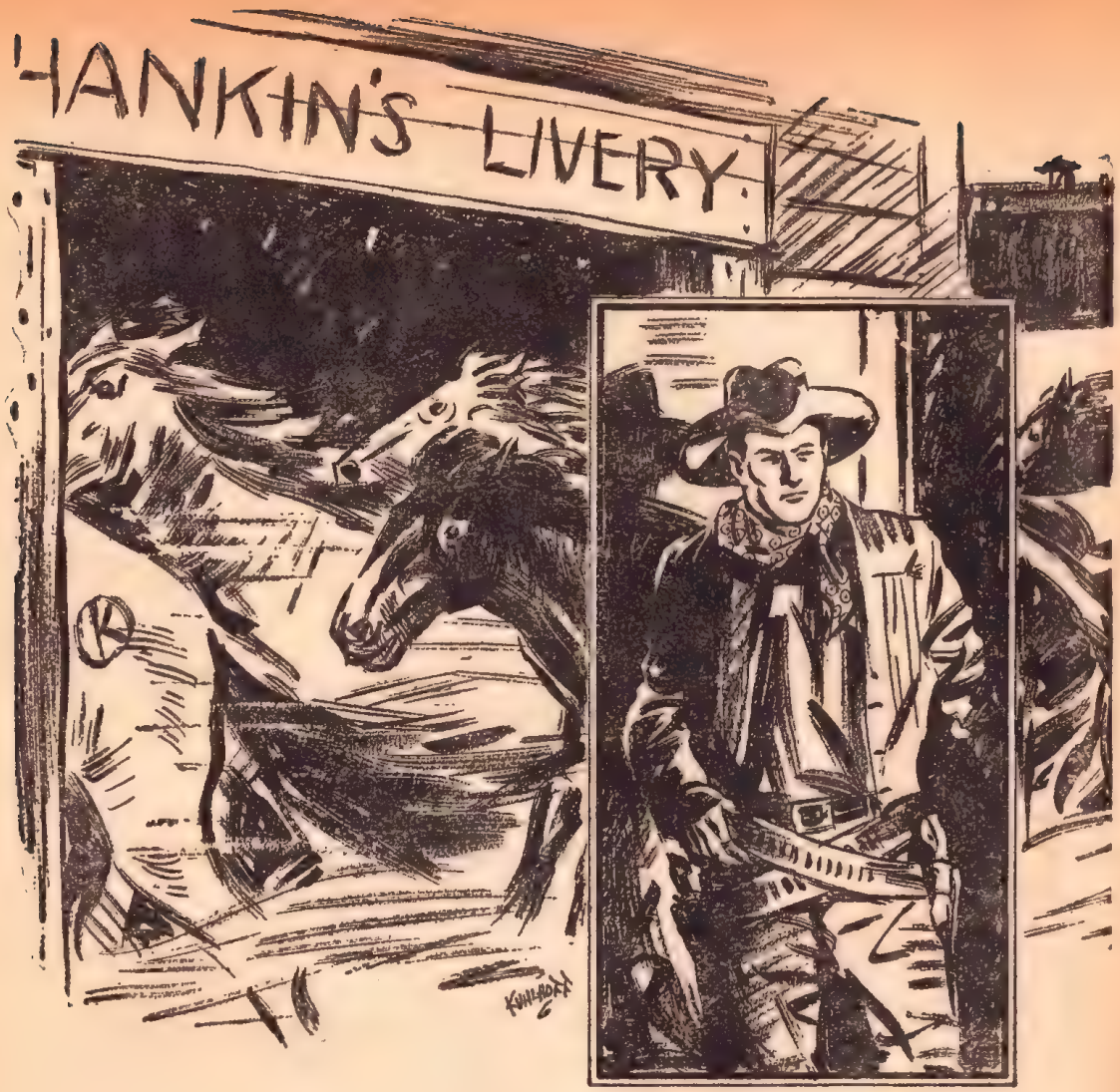


Hopalong Cassidy Takes Cards

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of
"Hopalong Cassidy, Trail Boss," "On the Trail of the Tumbling T," etc.

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE.

HOPALONG CASSIDY and Mesquite Jenkins—a combination hard to beat, two of Mulford's most popular characters in the same story.

Hopalong Cassidy, still holding down very competently the office of sheriff, has been told that in the hill country round the town of Hackamore there has been trouble. He is going to look into the matter, but first of all sends Mesquite Jenkins, who is not known there, to look

PART II

Mesquite Can't Help Learning Some of the Strange Quirks in the Livery Stable business

things over. Mesquite first talks to Whit Booth, a friend of Hopalong's who owns a horse ranch near Hackamore. Whit has been losing horses, and Mesquite thinks this is one manifestation of the "trouble." He goes to Hackamore and hires out as helper to the very drunk proprietor of the town livery stable. His first night on duty is broken by the arrival of a band of horses, and the hard looking customer who is running them says for Mesquite to be around in the morning for he shore wants to look him over.

VI

MESQUITE awakened with the sun, moved his eyes swiftly from side to side, thought for a moment and then moved his head. It was no dream. He drew in a deep breath and slowly sat up. He was hungry and it did not take him long to dress, go into the kitchen and start the fire. As he moved about he heard a stirring in the other bedroom and he smiled grimly in anticipation

of what might happen in the next few minutes. Old man Hankins was due for a surprise and there was no way of telling how he would take it.

The bacon sputtered in the pan and the potatoes sputtered in harmony. The mixed aroma now began to include that of coffee, and the total was intriguing. He heard a soft thump and then after a moment slow, heavy steps approached the kitchen. The frowsy head of the old man appeared in the doorway and the dull eyes rested on the busy cook.

Their dullness faded and the apathetic expression on the seamed face quickly changed.

"Well," said the old man with a snort. "Where th' hell did *you* come from? Who are you? What you doin' in my kitchen, in my house?"

Mesquite, busily turning potatoes, flashed a quick glance at his companion and boss. "Mornin'," he said. "You look a lot better than when I carried you in last night an' put you to bed. Have grub ready in a shake. There's a full bucket of water on th' wash bench. I'll be ready when you are."

"Who are you? What'n hell you doin' here?" demanded the old man.

"My name's Mesquite. I'm th' man you hired yesterday," he answered, now busy with the bacon. "You better get th' biscuits out of th' oven before they burn up. Long John sent me down, so I reckon it's his fault."

"Long John, huh?" replied the old man, still staring at the busy cook and caring little whether the biscuits burned or not. He watched the cook's quick move toward the oven. The biscuits were a golden brown. "Oh, you said Long John?"

"Yeah," replied Mesquite, putting the hot food on the table and then pouring the coffee. "Well, there it is; you feel like eatin'?"

"Yeah—allus do. You a friend of Long John?" asked the liveryman, and his voice seemed to hold a note of hopefulness. Mesquite sensed it but did not show that he did.

"No. Never saw him till yesterday. Dick Bartell sent me in to Long John with a message. I was lookin' for a job, too."

"Dick Bartell," muttered the old man, and the note of hopefulness was absent. Mesquite glanced curiously at him as he passed the bacon and then the potatoes. "Uh-huh," grunted Hankins. He was frowning. "Figgered they'd mebby work around to runnin' my business entire, whether I like it or not. So I hired you, did I?"

"Yeah; an' I hope you keep me," answered Mesquite. "I'd like to work for you. I want you to savvy that; I'd like to work for *you*."

They chewed in silence, neither looking at the other. The old man reached for his second biscuit, smeared oleomargarine on it and dragged a piece of bacon across it. The food, he decided, tasted better when someone else cooked it, especially the coffee.

"You carried me in an' put me to bed, huh?"

"Yeah."

"You pulled off my boots, loosened my collar an' then pinned them curtains together to keep out th' sun?"

"Yes. Here; gimme yore cup."

THE old man complied, but now his gaze did not avoid his companion's eyes. He was reading his new stable hand as best he could, taking in the regular features, the shallow blueness of the eyes, the cleft chin. He finished the biscuit and washed it down with the second cup of coffee. Something suddenly took his notice. Clean cloths hung on the line above the stove; the accumulated mess of soiled dishes was not to be seen. He glanced up at the two shelves on the wall and found the dishes, neatly stacked. He leaned back in his chair and sighed with contentment, which might have been due to repletion.

"Where'd you learn to cook like this, an' red up?" he asked.

Mesquite smiled and his cold eyes warmed a little.

"Used to help my maw when I was a kid."

"Did, huh?" grunted the old man. He brushed the stubble on his chin, gently nodding at some thought passing through his mind. "You a friend of Dick Bartell's?"

"Never saw him before I rode up to th' wagon," answered Mesquite. "I was hungry an' broke. They fed me an' grubstaked me so I wouldn't go hungry on my way to town. Bartell asked me to take a message in to Long John. I asked Long John where I could get a job. He sent me here, an' you hired me. I'd like to stay."

"Huh. Did you know anybody a-tall at th' wagon?" asked the liveryman.

"No," answered Mesquite, and a quick thought prompted the rest of his reply. "I asked for a job, but they wasn't hirin,'" he added, and watched his companion's head nod quickly.

"Glad of that," said the old man, and his smile made more wrinkles on his old face. "If they'd been ready to hire you, I don't reckon I'd wanta."

Mesquite smiled again.

"That woulda been kind of hard luck for me, I reckon."

"Yes, it would," replied the old man, slowly and perhaps meaningly. "It mebby woulda been right hard luck. Well, I hired you an' it sticks. You'll mebby see things that'll make you wonder. Nobody can stop you wonderin', but you jest mind yore own business, don't ask no questions, an' do yore work. It ain't nobody else's business if I need a hand. Is it a trade?"

"All th' way," answered Mesquite, rolling a cigarette.

The old man was looking at his companion's waist and he saw the wear caused by gun belts and holsters, and he let his gaze wander about the room; but the guns were not in sight.

"You better dress like you been used to," said Hankins as he reached for the dishpan. He partly filled it with water and placed it on the stove.

"Better let me red up," offered Mesquite.

"Two can work faster'n one," replied the old man. "Anyhow, yo're hired to work in th' stable, an' you ain't nobody's nigger less'n you want to be." He frowned suddenly as if he regretted what he had said, and the thought which prompted it, and reached up to take a cloth off the line.

WHEN they entered the stable the old man went straight toward the office, unlocked its front door and handed the keys to his new hand. Mesquite unlocked the big door, pushed it back and returned the keys. Then he went about his new work, curious to have a look at the horses ridden in the night before. To his surprise their backs were still wet, and thin, drying streaks of lather told of hard riding. They must have been ridden again after he had turned in, and brought back shortly before he awakened. None of them bore the Long Diamond or any brand which meant anything to him.

He went to work on them with gunny sack and brush, alert for treacherous hoofs and teeth, and then watered and fed them, and while they ate he cleaned out the stalls. The job done, he walked around the stable, looking it over. Of course the horses had been ridden after he had last seen them; the led animals were not here and, therefore, must have been taken away.

There was plenty of work to be done as a penalty for the old man's laziness, but it was not pressing and could be done a bit at a time. He walked toward the big door, picking up a chair on his way, and was soon leaning comfortably back against the outer wall, waiting for customers.

At this hour the sun was not too hot,

but he pulled the brim of his big hat down to shut out the slanting rays. He had just rolled his second cigarette of the day when he heard the office door squeak and looked up to see the old man standing in the opening, looking down at him, and clutching a piece of paper in his hand.

"You add up these figgers?" asked the boss, a grin on his old face.

"Yeah," drawled Mesquite. "That's why you hired me, I reckon."

"My Gawd!" muttered the liveryman, scratching his head vigorously. "I just don't remember nothin' that happened. I must have been as stiff as a plank."

"No, you wasn't," replied Mesquite with a faint smile. "You was as limp as a piece of soft buckskin." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "There's quite a lot of reddin' up to be done inside. I'll do it a little at a time so I won't run out of work."

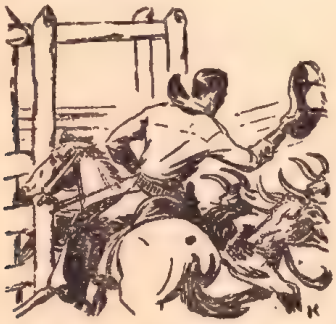
The old man nodded absently, his eyes on the sheet of paper.

"You git it th' first time?" he asked, a little suspiciously.

Mesquite looked up at the paper and nodded.

"Yeah, but mebby not as quick as you did," he answered with a grin.

"Ha, ha, ha! By Godfrey! Looks like I got three, four totals," chuckled Hankins. "Come on uptown. Damn' if I don't buy you a drink!"



"I just had breakfast," answered Mesquite, tossing the cigarette butt out into the street. "Besides, I don't like liquor; it makes me sick."

"Meanin' you don't drink?" demanded the old man incredulously.

"Reckon that's it," answered Mesquite, and out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement up the street. A group of men had turned the corner and were striding purposefully toward the stable. The blue in his eyes became frosty. "Reckon you better wait for that drink; here comes company, an' I figger it's trouble."

The old man jerked his head around, grunted something, and looked down at Mesquite.

"Mebby you better start reddin' up th' stable," he said, a frown on his face; "but you don't have to do no real work."

"I figger they're comin' to ask you to fire me," said Mesquite. "You aim to do that?"

THE old man stiffened, squared his shoulders and spat violently into the street.

"Not by a damn' sight!" he snapped, and went back into the office, where he threw a gun belt around him, caught the tongue as it whipped out in front, and slipped it through the buckle.

Mesquite leaned forward in the chair until its front legs touched the ground, and slowly stood up, facing the oncoming group and the door of the office.

The five men had slowed their pace and now one of them moved a step in the lead, and when they stopped their leader was about one stride from the new stable hand.

"Anybody wearin' two guns shore hadn't oughta work in no stable, waitin' on hosses," he said, coldly looking Mesquite in the eye. "That means you ain't got no job no more."

"Th' man that fires me is th' man that hired me," replied Mesquite calmly.

"That so?" sneered the leader. "You know who I am?"

"No. Who are you?"

"I'm Dutch Bill, an' folks that I talk to do like I say. Get yore traps an' clear out. Savvy?"

"That's right peculiar," replied Mes-

quite, a frosty smile on his lean, hard face. "I never heard of folks that amounted to anythin' take any orders from a windbag."

Dutch Bill's hand moved downward at the same instant that Mesquite's fist moved outward. Dutch Bill's head snapped back, and the rest of him naturally had to follow it. His impact disturbed the equilibrium of the two men immediately behind him, and before the other two could catch up with events they were staring at a gun muzzle.

"If you've come after yore hosses, go get 'em; if you haven't, then clear out an' carry Dutch Bill with you," said Mesquite. "I never saw none of you before last night, an' I got nothin' ag'n you; but when trouble comes my way I try to handle it. He went for his gun, an' I'm no damn' fool; but I ain't leavin' this job to hunt up another." He stepped slowly backward until the big door was in front of him. "Call yore play."

Four men were watching him closely, and flinty smiles broke across their faces. After all, Dutch Bill had gone for his gun, and he was accustomed to ride his companions with such a high hand that they had no love for him.

"*We* came for our hosses," said one of them, and glanced swiftly back at the recumbent form of his leader to assure himself that Dutch Bill's ears were not functioning. "What a smash! Well, he's big enough an' ornery enough to fight his own battles. Suppose we pass around th' peace pipe, an' ride on our way?"

"That's th' most sensible play," replied Mesquite, lowering his gun. "Right now you better get 'em yoreselves, an' pay th' boss before you go. I'm too busy right now to give you a hand."

"Yo're a good kid, feller," said another of the four; "which makes me feel sorry for you. Might be a darn' good idear if you did hunt another job, an' a long way from Hackamore."

"Thanks; but I'm stubborn," said the new stable hand and slowly sheathed his weapon as the old man, minus gun belt and gun, appeared in the office door.

"Wish you boys would quit yore rowdyin'!" snapped Hankins. "Go get yore hosses an' clear out. I'll put it in th' book. An' take Dutch Bill with you before he gets hisself shot." He glared at Mesquite. "I hired you to work, an' not to fight my customers. Get into th' office, here, an' add up them figgers!"

Mesquite frowned, hesitated, and then slowly obeyed the orders, the old man squeezing against the door frame to let him enter. The four customers stood Dutch Bill on his feet and two of them steadied him while their companions disappeared in the stable. When they came out, leading five saddled horses, their leader had recovered his senses and was struggling with his arguing and pacifying friends. They finally had their way with him and soon all were riding up the street.

The old man watched them until they had turned the corner and then he swung about and smiled at his new hired man, who was searching for something.

"Lose somethin'?" asked Hankins with a chuckle.

"No," answered Mesquite. "I'm lookin' for those figgers."

"There ain't none. That just seemed to be th' best way to end th' argument. If you'd stayed out there in plain sight when Dutch Bill come to there mighta been gunplay." He was slowly shaking his head, his mirth gone. "We don't want none of that."

"Don't we?" calmly asked the stable hand.

"No, we don't!" answered the old man, his expression now one of worry.

"It mighta been better for me, though, if there'd been some, while I was *lookin'*," replied Mesquite. "I've met his kind before."

The old man shifted his gaze, and looked to be very uncomfortable.

"Reckon mebby you have," he said.

His eyes wandered back again to those of his hired man. "You're a young un; I'm told. Trouble don't mean so much to you as it does to me. A-aw, hell. Come to figger it, I reckon you'd better not tote two guns; they make a man stand out a lot. Ain't one enough?"

"Reckon so," answered Mesquite, looking idly at a much thumbed account book. He picked it up and clawed a pencil from a box of odds and ends. "Tell me their names, an' how much to put down; then it won't be forgot."

"I'll take care of th' accounts," said the old man, holding out his hand with a quickness which was almost spasmodic. He put the book behind him on the desk and then looked at the door leading into the stable. "You might start in reddin' up out there."

"What's Dutch Bill's name?" asked Mesquite, his gaze now locked with that of his boss.

"Dutch Bill, of course. What you reckon it is?" snapped the old man. His gaze wavered but came back again.

"Figgered there might be more of it—his real name," answered Mesquite, slowly turning toward the stable door. "There generally is," he added.

"Yeah, there is if you know it; but Dutch Bill is all I ever heard," replied the liveryman. "Wait a minute. I like you, young man. I may be gettin' into trouble over it, but I do, just th' same. There ain't no reason for th' stable bein' red up, not a mite of reason. What's in th' corners an' ain't in th' way don't bother nobody. It ain't never bothered me, an' it hadn't oughta bother you. You take care of th' hosses, I'll take care of th' office, an' we'll let th' stable take care of itself. I didn't hire you to be no damn' nigger. You get rid of one of them gun-belts, do yore reg'lar chores, an' look after th' office when I ain't in it. Hell!" he exploded, as a thought came into his mind. "What wages did we agree on when I hired you?"

MESQUITE hooked his thumbs in the gun belts, leaned back against the door casing and smiled.

"We didn't get that far," he answered, and laughed. "You came to, handed me some figgers to add, hired me, an' passed out ag'in."

"H'm!" said the old man, greatly relieved. "H'm." He cleared his throat, slyly glanced at his hired man and then vigorously scratched the back of his head. "What you say to a dollar a day an' found for yoreself an' hoss?"

Mesquite reflected that the track layers on the railroads, working hard, got no more than that. He smiled again.

"You figger I'm worth that?" he asked.

The old man studied him for a moment.

"Yes, an' mebby more; but that's as much as I can pay."

"It's enough," said Mesquite.

"All right. There's an old coat I wear when I'm doin' dirty work," said Hankins. "Wear it when you work, if it fits you. It'll save your shirt."

"All right," replied Mesquite. "You said you liked me. All right to that, too. I like you. We'll let it ride that way, but if th' time comes when you can't pay me a dollar a day, then I'll work for my keep. Now you better go an' get that drink; but it might be a good thing if you don't get too many of 'em. I'll shuck a gun-belt and get right back."

"Damn' yore impudence!" snapped the old man. "Th' liquor I drink ain't none of yore business! I won't have no young whippersnapper tell me how—" His voice ceased abruptly as he realized that he was talking to himself. He scratched his head again, looked down to see what it was he had picked up, and stiffened slightly. He glanced hurriedly around the little room and then walked swiftly to a pile of illustrated weeklies on a shelf in the rear. Slipping the account book in the pile, he wheeled, strode through the door and along the street to the Hackamore Hotel.

Long John, once again doing his own

trick, glanced up as the shadow of this early morning customer fell through the doorway; but he knew who it was by the sound of the steps, and the knowledge did not seem to particularly please him.

"Mornin', John."

"Mornin', Joe. Startin' in a little early, ain't you?" asked the bartender, sliding bottle and glass toward his customer. "Nice day."

"Yeah; fine day," replied the customer, ignoring the unpleasant remark and grabbing bottle and glass. He filled the glass and tossed off the drink. "Hah! That puts life into a man. An' I need a few jolts *this* mornin'." The old man shoved his hat back upon his head and rested an elbow on the bar. "Well, any news?"

The bartender regarded his companion curiously.

"It all depends what you call news," he replied, idly moving his cloth back and forth before him. "Seein' you had to come up here to ask for news, mebby it don't amount to anythin'; but I'd call it news, an' none too good."

HANKINS grinned. "If it ain't no secret, suppose you tell me about it."

"Well," said Long John, looking his companion in the eye, "Dutch Bill an' his friends just left. Dutch had a swollen jaw an' th' disposition of a rattlesnake. It appears he wasn't lookin' when he was hit. You'll mebby lose a stable hand."

"Wasn't lookin', huh?" snapped the old man. "Then he didn't say that he was watchin' that youngster like a cat, an' goin' for his gun?"

Long John raised his eyebrows.

"You don't say!"

"You jest heard me say it! I was there, an' saw the' hull of it."

"Well," sighed Long John, shaking his head. "That only makes it worse. Dutch Bill will feel that he'll have to save his face. I'm more afraid than ever that yo're goin' to lose yore stable hand."

"I mebby will, John," agreed the old man, sighing deeply as he laid the proper atmosphere for pouring the second drink. "He's a good lad, too. Carried me in, put me to bed, took off my shoes, pinned th' curtains tight shut, red up th' kitchen, an' had breakfast all ready when I turned out in th' mornin'. Then he faced down Dutch Bill an' his crew, knocked Bill into week before last when Bill went for his gun, an' then up an' made friends with th' rest of 'em. I mebby will lose him, John; no one man can stand up before Dutch Bill an' his hellions very long. Friend of yourn, is he?"

Mesquite was no friend of Long John's, but after the old man's recital, Long John decided that some friendships started on the spur of the moment. He carefully considered what he had just heard, was glad that the old man had someone to look after him, and decided to tell a white lie.

"Yeah, he is. All th' way from th' Jack," he replied. "I sent him down to you. He needed a job, an' you needed a good man to help you around th' stable. It just seemed to fit together." He glanced at the bottle, at the empty glass, and at his customer.

The old man removed his elbow from the bar, stood up straight and glared at the man behind the counter.

"One drink is all I need today, so far," he declared. His face flushed. "Not that no man on earth can tell me how much liquor I'm to drink; but I had a good breakfast, saw Dutch Bill swap ends in th' air, an' him an' his crew eat humble pie. As I said, just now, no man on earth can give me orders about drinkin'; so I'll have just one more, a couple cigars—an' when I drink this un, it's to hell with Dutch Bill!"

"Yeah," replied the bartender sarcastically. "When you drink this one, an' a couple more some place else, you keep yore fool mouth shut about Dutch Bill! Ain't you got no sense a-tall?"

"Mebby I ain't, because I'm gettin'

damn tired of th' way my stable is bein' used," replied the old man, with a courage which spoke well for the potency of Long John's liquor. "Why, only last night they drove in—" He stopped, clapped his hand

over his mouth and looked swiftly around the room.

The bartender reached out, scooped up the bottle and placed it behind him on the backbar. He slid two cigars across the counter.

"This is once you drink like you been told to," he said, flatly. "Th' more you drink, th' more you talk. You've talked too much already. Take them cigars, on th' house, an' go back where you belong. I saw my friend was wearin' two guns, an' I liked th' way they set on him, an' th' way he moved. Like a damn' bobcat.

That's mebby why I sent him to you. There's talk goin' on around this town. Go back to th' stable an' *keep your fool mouth shut!* An' if you can find any way to keep yore stable from bein' used nights, you *do* it!"

"But they'd shoot me quick as a wink!" retorted the old man. "An' I know too much!"

"I said *if* you can do it," snapped Long John. "Mebby now that you got that Mesquite workin' for you, some way will show up."

Hankins flashed a longing glance at the bottle so far out of his reach, shook his head slowly and sadly, and turned and walked out, and his gait was not as quick as it had been.

VII

HOPALONG CASSIDY rode into Twin River, stopped before the livery stable of his friend Rick Bradley, and moved lazily into the building. Sounds of whistling came from the rear and he kept on going, and saw the proprietor turn around from hanging up some harness.

"Mornin', Hoppy," said Rick with a smile.

"Mornin', Rick," replied Hopalong. "I just dropped in to see if there was any letter here for me."

"There ain't any yet. How's Buck an' th' rest of 'em out at th' ranch?"

"They're all right," answered Hopalong. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and seemed to be studying something. He exchanged a few more words with his friend, turned on his heel and went back the way he had come. He was getting too fussy, he decided; the kid hadn't had time enough in which to learn anything worth writing about.

He mounted, rode up the street a short distance and again swung from the saddle, this time in front of his office. Last night's mail was on the desk and he began pawing it over without much interest. He picked up the first envelope, tore it open and glanced at the brief letter, but he took time to look at the faces of the two portraits on the "wanted" posters. They awakened no memories and he put them to one side, to be tacked on the wall later. The second letter took little time to read and went into the wastebasket. The last was addressed to him personally, and any lack of interest he might have had evaporated before he had read the first line. By the time the last word had passed before his eyes he was smiling a little. So Whit had got himself naturalized, the boys were calling him Hank, he was doing well or had been before the rustling had started, and he liked Mesquite very much.

He put the letter in a pocket and

stood quietly thinking until the distant, vibrant sound of a whistle broke in upon him and roused him to the doings of one of his regular morning chores. He had two trains to meet every day, and this was the day's first. It was the westbound and due in a few minutes. He walked quickly out to his horse, mounted and rode toward the station. As he reached the station platform the train was slowing down, and the litter, swirling in the air, was beginning to settle, while the smoke and dust made a temporary fog.

Hopalong took his place near the baggage car, where he could see the full length of the train, and in his mind's eye were the two new "wanted" pictures. Half a dozen passengers stepped down to the platform, and he was just about to turn away when he saw one more appear, and as his gaze settled upon this person his eyes grew cold. The damned old horsethief was back again!

The passenger looked quickly and furtively around and was about to scurry past the end of the station when he glanced a little farther to the left and seemed to shrink. How well he knew that cold face, and the quick gesture he saw could not be disobeyed. If he had dared he would have run, but he did not dare. While he paused for an instant he saw the cold faced man walk toward the end of the freight office and then out of sight behind it. It would do him no good to try to get away, and it might do him quite a lot of harm. This was one of the moments he had dreaded. He shook his head slowly and shuffled toward the freight office, and as he turned the far corner of the building he stopped for an instant, looking down on the hat and the broad shoulders of the man who was lazily seated on the edge of the platform and watching his slowly swinging feet. Then the passenger took the few remaining steps and stopped even with the shoulders. He stood so for a cruel and silent several minutes and then the seated man spoke.

"Set down, Shanghai," invited the sheriff pleasantly. "Yo're allus in such a stew. Set down an' smoke a cigarette." The speaker turned from the waist, leaning back to look up at the other. He held out cigarette papers and a sack of tobacco. "Set down, an' smoke."

SHANGHAI'S expression of fear lessened a little as he yielded to a faintly budding hope. Maybe this was just cat-and-mouse, but he had to do as he was told. He slowly and rather laboriously lowered himself to the platform and then, finally settled to his satisfaction, took the tobacco and papers again held out to him. He placed the lip of the bag to his teeth and opened it and then tilted some of its contents into the curved paper, but his trembling hands made a sorry mess of it, and he was not at all helped by the knowledge that his companion's eyes were on him.

Hopalong reached out, took the sack and paper, and deftly rolled a smoke. He bent over, grinned into the old man's face and then shoved the cigarette between Shanghai's lips. Striking a match, he touched it to the curled paper tip.

"Just like a sucklin' babe," he said, grinning. "You ain't got no reason to be leary of me unless you got somethin' in yore mind to make you so. They treat you all right, back there?"

Shanghai seemed to shrink in his poorly fitting but new and shoddy clothes. His sentence had not been as heavy as it might well have been, and he had earned time off for good behavior. The good behavior had not been due to any change of heart, any inner goodness, but rather was the result of the man's shrewd thinking. He was behind stone walls and steel bars; the more trouble he made, the more he would earn for himself. Good behavior was just plain, common sense. Now he was face

to face with the man he always had believed to be implacable, and the man who had been most instrumental in his conviction. He glanced sideways into the blue eyes of the peace officer, caught a glint of humor which seemed, fleetingly, to be a little warm; and the little bud of hope grew a trifle.

"They treated me all right," confessed the old man. "I didn't give 'em no trouble, don't want to give nobody no trouble. I'm jest a pore old man an' I'm kinda lost."

Again his glance swept over the officer's face and he thought that the glint of humor had grown. The sheriff was implacable, yes; but Shanghai had never heard that he was cruel or unjust.

"Kinda lost, huh?" asked Hopalong with keen relish, his mind running back through the past, when Shanghai was known as an old fox, an unintentional compliment to the fox. There had not been a trail, a path, a piece of ground, a trick of woodcraft that he had not known and made very good use of. For twenty-odd years he had escaped arrest, not to mention conviction; and he had made his living all of those years by theft. And now he felt kind of lost!

"Yes," admitted the old man out of one side of his mouth. He was not as old as he pretended. "Yes, kinda lost. I got to find somethin' to do so I won't starve. I'd ruther it was somethin' honest, Sheriff. I'm too old to go back there ag'in, an' ever hope to come out alive."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "They shouldn't a sent me back here where everybody knows me. I'm afeared nobody'll hire me."

"Mebby not, 'though you've paid th' debt an' are supposed to be all square," replied the sheriff, knowing how utterly empty his words really were. "As you say, you've got to earn a livin' or starve. An' if you earn it like you used to you shore will go back ag'in; an' then, like you say, you'll mebby never come out alive. You got any money?"

"I got th' five dollars they gave me, along with this suit of clothes," answered Shanghai, wriggling uncomfortably.

"That ain't very much in th' face of a drunk long delayed," said Hopalong, smiling faintly. He rammed a huge fist into a pocket and brought it out again. Something yellow peeked out from between his fingers as he reached out and took hold of the old man's hand.

"There," he said. "Ten more oughta help quite a lot. After th' long lay-off it won't cost you as much to get drunk as it did in th' old days. After you sober up, come out to th' ranch. When you get there ask for me an' insist on seein' me. I sat there nights. I'd rather give you a job under my nose an' Buck's than go bustin' all over th' country tryin' to catch you ag'in. There was one thing I never questioned about you; I allus knew you had plenty of brains. Only trouble was, you used 'em th' wrong way. You've still got th' brains, I reckon, an' from what you just said I figger that you might come to use 'em enough to see that you can't lick th' law set-up in these parts." He placed a gentle hand on the old man's shoulder. "Go on with yore bender, sober up, an' see me at th' ranch some night soon." He chuckled. "You savvy?"

"Shore. I savvy," answered the old man, knowing that he really only understood part of it; but the ten dollars was real, and it also seemed that this old-time enemy was not holding too hard a grudge; but his nature had been formed by the years which lay behind him, and seldom in his sinful life had Shanghai trusted any man.

THE idea of a good drunk revolved in his mind; back there where he had just come from the edge of his thirst had become blunted, and he had gone without liquor for so long a time that now

he was practically starting anew; and on the train back to Twin River as the miles monotonously followed each other he had argued with himself about the spending of the precious five dollars. It would not last him long if he started sliding it across the bars. Now he had three times as much, and at least the promise of a job. He straightened up slightly and tried to square his shoulders.

"You ain't a-foolin' an old man, are you?" he asked.

"Not in no way a-tall," answered Hopalong, gently shaking his head. "Yo're supposed to be all square. Far's I'm concerned, you are. I'm just figgerin' to give you a chance. After that it'll be up to you."

"It's a long way out to th' ranch, an' I'm purty soft for walkin'," said Shanghai. "I don't reckon nobody'll lend *me* a hoss, seein' how many I've stole, an' I don't want to—to steal one. He-he-he! That'd put me right back in my old stride, wouldn't it?"

"I'll drop around to the livery barn an' see Rick Bradley," said the sheriff. "When you get ready to go out to th' ranch he'll let you have a hoss."

"You be at th' ranch tonight?" asked Shanghai.

Hopalong laughed with keen enjoyment and again rested a hand on the old man's shoulder.

"Shore I will," he replied, still laughing; "but I ain't lookin' for no miracles or expectin' you to grow any wings. You get that bender all over with, an' go out to th' ranch when yo're flat busted an' cold sober. An' I wouldn't do too much talkin' if I was you, 'specially about how smart you used to be. Folks around here don't have to be reminded about how you stole their critters."

"Talkin' never put me up no tree!" retorted Shanghai with the first indication of spirit he had shown so far. "If some others I used to know had kept their fool traps shut it mighta saved all of us a lot of trouble."

"I know that," laughed Hopalong. "That's mebbe another reason why I'm givin' you a job. I allus did like a tight mouth."

"Any of my old friends in town, or anywhere near?" asked Shanghai somewhat anxiously, trying to remember whom among them he had doublecrossed and would have to watch.

"Not one of 'em," answered the sheriff. "You warn't very lucky at th' end, but yore friends warn't even as lucky as you. All right; so go get those drinks. I'll expect you when I see you, so we'll leave th' time open. Good luck, Old Timer."

Shanghai sat as if frozen to the platform, watching the sheriff stride away. The same trim, bowed legs; the same broad, sloping shoulders swinging easily above the lean waist; the same swing of the body, the short, choppy walk of a horseman, and the two plain guns low down and tied.

The old man let go a gusty sigh; if he were only twenty years younger—yes, even ten years would do. Age was robbing him of the right to choose his course. Still, his old choice had been wrong in the final showdown, as proved by the stone walls and the steel bars. It was now just plain, common sense to choose the other road, and to be with the law instead of against it. There was one bit of country, outside this county and across the state line, which he might try if he were younger, the section where he had spent the earlier years of

his life and which he knew as well as he did his name. It was just no good; he'd try the safe way, for awhile at least. Perhaps after he got his feet firmly under him and got his bearings, and had saved up a little stake out of his wages —well, that would come later.

He looked past the sheriff along the littered, dusty street. Saloon, eating house, saloon, general store, post office, saloon, pool hall which had not been there before, livery stable, saloon. In one of those saloons, come night, there would be a few riders who would take a gamble now and then. Huh; there would be time for that later on.

He slipped a hand into his pocket to feel of the money nestling there, and let his roving gaze drift back to one building down the street. Yes, sir; if he were only ten years younger he might give the sheriff's office something to worry about.

He stirred, slid off the edge of the platform and shuffled out onto the bare and dusty square. As he neared the first of the buildings he saw the sheriff swing into Rick Bradley's livery stable, and a cunning gleam came into his eyes as a tricky thought popped into his mind; but he shook his head regretfully —none of the old crowd was left, and he had no real choice. He fixed his hungry gaze on the building he had singled out and shuffled slowly toward it.

VIII

THIS was one of the days when the sheriff's office had nothing to do, and about mid-morning Hopalong became tired of the office and the boring inactivity. There was no reason for him to stay in town. He went to the back door and stuck his head out of it, calling to his deputy who was fussing around the small corral.

"Mike!" he called. "I'm leavin' her to you. I'm goin' out to th' ranch."

He whirled on one heel, clipped across the sounding board floor of the little office, went out to his horse and had one foot off the ground and in the stirrup when he paused in that position, his eyes and his thoughts on the man who was just coming out of the lunchroom down the street. The restless horse made him hop about on one leg, but he did not know that he was doing it. It was Shanghai, and the old man appeared to be unbelievably sober. This miracle impacted so forcibly on the sheriff's mind that he put the raised foot back on the ground and quit his hopping.

Shanghai glanced both ways out of the corner of his eyes, caught sight of the sheriff, and forthwith shuffled toward that surprised person. He wiped his lips with the back of a hand and smeared egg-yellow out on his cheek. He had yearned for ham and eggs for months and months and months, and now he was as full of that delectable combination as his capacity would allow. As a matter of fact he had begun to suspect that he was just a little mite too full of it. He knew that the sheriff was openly and frankly studying him as he shuffled along, but now, full to the limit with ham and eggs, the old man walked straight into that stare with a confidence strange to him.

"I been waitin' a long time for a feed like that," he confessed as he slowed before the still studious peace officer. "I figger that mebby I'm on my way to a bellyache, but I just don't care."

"Eggs," mused the sheriff, his gaze on the dirty cheek. "That means ham, too. W-e-l-l, th' eggs won't hurt you, an' you've already gambled with th' ham, which never has hurt me. Where you goin' now?"

"I was figgerin' to go get that hoss an' ride out to th' Double Y," answered Shanghai with a faint grin. "An' I will, too, less'n you've changed yore mind."

"Reckon you can hold up yore end at a brandin' fire?" asked Hopalong.

"The old man stiffened slightly, and then nodded.

"I don't know how many I can grab an' flop," he answered dubiously. "I might do better, for awhile, tendin' th' irons; but I'll stay with it till I mebby drop. That's right hard work an' I ain't as tough as I uster be; but I'll try it."

Hopalong laughed gently, still in a more or less dazed frame of mind because the old man was full of ham and eggs instead of frontier liquor. Perhaps the old reprobate was really going to amount to something.

"All right," he said, swinging into the saddle. "Get that hoss an' let's make tracks." He swung the animal around and rode at a walk toward the livery stable, the old man shuffling along near a stirrup.

After a short wait he saw Shanghai riding toward him in the dim light of the stable, mounted on a Double Y horse and sitting a Double Y saddle as if he really belonged there. And he sat the saddle with an ease and grace which belied the long time he had not even seen one. The sheriff grinned at the sight and wondered how long the old man could stand saddle punishment after so long a lay-off. And he suspected that the same thought was in Shanghai's mind. The once powerful thigh muscles must now be pitiably weak.

They left town stirrup to stirrup and at a much slower pace than Hopalong had been wont to leave it. The ride ahead of them was a long one, too long to be comfortable for a man who had not sat a saddle a number of years. And so they rode, leg to leg, each silent and buried in thought, and each thinking of the other and of what might lay ahead. An hour passed and then Shanghai, surreptitiously trying to find a more comfortable position on the saddle and without success, glanced sideways at his companion, and spoke.

"I'm afeared I won't be much account at no brandin' fire for th' first few days," he said, and tried to square his shoulders; "but it won't take me long, I reckon, to get toughened to it." He chuckled. "How you know I won't steal yore cattle?"

"That's somethin' I got to gamble on," answered the sheriff. "An' as to you gettin' toughened up at a brandin' fire, I've kinda changed my mind. We're got some wild ones in th' big hoss pasture, an' we're short of busted hosses. We'll bring in some of 'em an' put 'em in th' breakin' corral an' let you try yore hand at tamin' 'em."

Shanghai stared straight ahead with unseeing eyes. There had been a time when he could break range horses with any man; but that time was so long, long ago. The great thigh muscles were great no longer, as he was very acutely aware at this moment. It was almost like a death sentence, but he squared his shoulders again.

"Shore," he agreed, and tried to make the word sound hearty and enthusiastic. Perhaps he would be driven to meet some of the boys in that saloon back there in Twin River; but if he did, and got caught, they would never take him alive.

HOPALONG laughed outright and loudly, and clapped his heavy hand on the bony shoulder which sagged under the pressure.

"Just wanted to see how yore spirit is, Old Timer," he said, and laughed again. "Th' only time you'll get near that breakin' pen is when you set on th' top rail an' watch somebody else take th' dynamite out of 'em. Likewise, yo're not goin' to mess up th' smooth work at no brandin' fire. We been keepin' a healthy, tough, first-class cowhand at th' ranch to wrangle in th' saddle stock for me an' Buck. One of them fires is shore needin' him. I'm figgerin' on you to take his place. Are you any damn' good at all

at wranglin' in a few head of hosses?"

"Sheriff," said the old man, earnestly, "there just ain't no better hoss wrangler ever lived than I be."

"Huh! You know, Old Timer, I kinda believe you."

"Yes, sir, Cassidy," said the other, his shoulders truly squared now and his soul more or less at peace, "that's where I shine." He squirmed slightly in the saddle and was sorry that his bones were not better upholstered, and his thighs were so sore it was all he could do to hold back the tears.

The sheriff caught the movement, felt sorry for the old man, and drew rein abruptly. His companion quickly followed suit and looked around in surprise.

"Allus like to breathe my hoss about here," explained Hopalong gravely.

Shanghai's expression was tinged with suspicion. As he painfully shifted again in the saddle he looked his companion squarely in the eye.

"Th' breed must fell off while I was away," he said, and grinned. "Hell, no hoss that's worth a damn has to be breathed so soon. They ain't even worked up a sweat."

"I allus like to be kind to dumb animals," replied Hopalong, trying to keep his face straight.

Shanghai turned the remark over in his mind and slowly his pale face grew red.

"You meanin' I'm a dumb animal?" he demanded with more spirit than he had shown for years. There could be no other explanation for this absurd breather.

"Keep yore hat on," replied the sheriff kindly. "I know how long it's been since you set a hoss, an' you ain't got no meat at all on yore bones, an' no saddle muscles. We ain't in no hurry. You feel like swingin' down an' stretchin' yore legs?"

The old man was silent while one might count ten, and conflicting thoughts were fighting it out in his mind. Then he sat up straight, his heart warming the little bud of hope.

"Hell, no!" he exclaimed. "You comin' along with me, Hoppy?" And his dust suddenly swirled high around the man he left behind.

Hopalong sent his mount forward at a lope, and the smile on his face was something worth seeing. It was not long before he caught up with the old man and, having caught up, suited his pace to that of his companion. Shanghai finally slowed, and his companion with him, and after a few moments they were again riding at a more comfortable speed and stirrup to stirrup.

"How come they called you Shanghai?" curiously asked the sheriff after awhile.

"On account of a song I used to sing. You know, them ham an' aigs ain't botherin' me a mite."

ANOTHER interval of silence, and then:

"You figger swappin' saddles will make it easier for you?" asked the sheriff.

"Dunno," answered Shanghai. "This un won't be so bad after I get used to it." He appeared to be thinking. "What happened to that Mesquite feller that ketched me?"

"Oh, quite a lot of things; but he ain't here no more," answered the sheriff. "Why?"

"Smart young cub, he was," growled the old man; "but he never ketched me all by hisself. No stranger to that country could know it well enough to find out where I was holed up. Hoppy, it was you who told him where to go, an' where to look. But I'll say this for him; when it came to trackin' an' readin' sign, he was shore hell on wheels. Just like a damn' Injun, he was."

"He was Injun trained—Mountain Utes, down in th' Southwest," replied

Hopalong. "Not him personal, but his father. His father taught him. As to me tellin' him about where to look—well, mebby. Your boys ambushed me," he said after a moment's pause. "You come nigh on killin' me. I had a damn' narrer squeak. Mesquite was a friend of mine, but I didn't know just how good a friend he was till then. He swore he'd get you all—every damn' one. He did it. You ever have a friend like that?"

"Hell, no! I never had no friend that I didn't have to watch every move he made, outguess every thought he had! You mean to tell me that young hellion went out after us an' got us, one by one, just because he was a friend of yourn? There warn't no reward out for us?"

"Yes, to yore first question," answered Hopalong. "No, to yore second."

Shanghai had felt more or less lost, all along; but now, metaphorically speaking, he threw up his hand. This was almost past belief. He had been on the front end of that chase and he knew how hard and how dangerous it had been.

"Hoppy," he said, thoughtfully and sorrowfully, "if I could ever have a friend like that, there ain't a damn' thing on earth I wouldn't do for him. I can't believe it. It just don't make sense!"

"It makes a lot of sense," replied Hopalong quietly. "An' Mesquite is only one of my friends. Only one of more'n a dozen," he said with quiet pride.

"I knowed you had friends," admitted Shanghai, "but I didn't have th' sense to know what it meant, what it meant to me. Fine chance *we* had to lick a combination like that."

"You just couldn't lick it, in th' long run," replied the sheriff. "You had to have luck with you all th' way, all th' time, an' not make even one mistake." He turned and looked quizzically at the old man. "An' *that* still goes."

"Yeah," grunted Shanghai, thoughtfully. "An' th' luck didn't run with us all th' time, an' we did make a mistake or two." The horses kept on going and the friendly wind kept the dust behind them. After a moment Shanghai turned his head. "I been bitter ag'in that damn' cub," he admitted, "bitter for years. But I'm beginnin' to see him in a different light. We was on one side an' he was on th' other, an' we both did our damndest. I'd shore like to have a friend like him, to have friends like you have."

"Mebby you will, some day," replied the sheriff, "but you'll have to earn 'em, you'll have to deserve 'em."

They passed a turn in the trail and ahead of them lay the slope which led down to the buildings of the Double Y, small dots in the distance.

SHANGHAI had not replied to his companion's last words, but he was thinking as hard as he ever had thought in years. He had backed the wrong plays all his life; but a man who had good sense could change, perhaps, if he wanted to. This sheriff, and his unbelievable friends, was implacable only to those who ran against the law. And look at the friends he had! Any man who had friends like those must be square and kind and true. He saw the buildings come steadily closer, and he wondered if he could stick it out; but stick it out he did. They were heading straight for the bunkhouse, but suddenly Hopalong's horse crowded over to the left and they both turned slightly and then stopped before a small, frame house.

"Just a minute, Shanghai," said the

sheriff, dismounting before the door of the little dwelling. He went into the building, but soon came out again, waving a careless hand behind him. "My shack," he explained as he swung back into the saddle.

A few moments later they drew up before the bunkhouse door and somehow, in some way, Shanghai managed to get his leg over the saddle and to get down and stand erect beside the horse.

A curious puncher loafed to the door and leaned lazily against the casing. He nodded to Hopalong and then looked curiously at the old man.

"Bill," said the sheriff, waving a hand, "meet Shanghai, an old timer in these parts. He'll wrangle in our saddle hosses from now on. You head for Lanky in th' mornin'. He'll likely need another roper or cutter."

He pushed past the puncher, motioning for Shanghai to follow.

"There's two bunks that ain't bein' used," he said, indicating them. "Take yore pick, an' make yoreself at home. I'll see you later." He started to turn away, but checked himself. "When you ain't wranglin' you can give cook a hand." Then he turned again and left the building.

Shanghai watched the sheriff stride to the door and through it, exchanged grins with the puncher and then looked at the two bunks. The farthest from the door would be, everything else being equal, the quietest. This was the one he chose. As an indication of possession he made it up and turned back the blanket, his hands moving deftly and from long habit, and awakened a grudged admiration in the watching Bill.

"There," said the new hand on the Double Y. "Now 'spose you show me th' ropes an' tell me what I should oughta know. I specially want to know about th' hosses rid by Buck an' Hoppy. I can see where I'm goin' to be too busy for a spell to wash many damn' dishes. Can't cook handle a little outfit like this all by hisself?"

"He shore can, Shanghai," answered Bill, leading the way toward the door; "an' he can handle you, too, mebby." He had no suspicion that he was talking to an ex-cattle thief, for he was comparatively new to the country.

"Huh!" snorted the new wrangler. "Mebby he can! Is that th' blacksmith shop? Yep, I see it is. I'll take a try at blacksmithin' to get my hand in ag'in." He glanced ahead at the smaller corral and slowed his peculiar steps. "Mighty nice hosses, them are. This outfit allus had good uns. *Oh!*"

"What's matter?" asked Bill, curiously.

SHANGHAI drew a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"Little cramp, I reckon," he explained, and hated to think how sore he would be in the morning; but in the morning he was going to ride, no matter how sore he was, and he was going to keep on riding until he rode the soreness out. He had jumped from the penitentiary right smack into a good outfit, a good and easy job with a man who was treating him far better than he had any right to expect, and he was not such a fool as to risk losing any part of it.

He well knew the tight friendship and close loyalty which bound together the members of this outfit; he knew it to his sorrow and, knowing it, he also knew that it had not been just the law which had laid him low, but the almost unbelievable friendship existing between these men. When Hopalong had been ambushed it had been like stirring up a nest of hornets, and the angry stinging had not stopped until every man concerned in that affair had either been killed or captured.

From now on he was going to be on his best behavior, for that would pay him best; but he sighed as he thought of how he would miss the old excitement,

the old matching of wits. Oh, well; at least he would win food, lodging, smoking tobacco, wages and companionship—and all for wrangling in a few horses and for helping the cook. The last thought made him frown a little, but he brightened instantly and shuffled on; the cook might provide him with opportunity for using his wits to avoid work in the kitchen.

Late in the afternoon the cook stuck his head out of the galley door and shouted lustily for his new helper, but he shouted in vain because the new helper had persuaded Bill to show him where the riding stock grazed, on the plea that it would save him time when it became his job to wrangle them. He timed it so nicely that he could just hear the cook's summons sounding over the ridge behind him; and while he was sore and stiff from the morning's ride, he preferred to ride and suffer to peeling potatoes and performing the cook's more unpleasant tasks; and he felt that he might be a great deal stiffer in the morning without this limbering up.

Supper over, there was no way in which Shanghai could escape the kitchen work, but he made the best of it and pretended to like it, only he was very clumsy and forgetful. The work done, he and the cook joined Bill in the bunkroom, and Shanghai refused to make a third hand at cards. He was stiff and sore, he said, from riding, and thought it would do him good to wander around the corrals and try to work some of it out of him. Neither the cook nor Bill had any yearning for his company and were already picking up their cards, and hardly noticed when he left.

SHANGHAI shuffled around for a while and then started back toward the bunkhouse, when the lights in the ranchhouse engaged his attention. One of his old traits came to life quickly; spying and snooping were ingrained in him. It was an art with him, and had saved his skin on more than one occasion in the old days. He wondered how good he was after such a lapse of time, and also what was being said about him, and so he started toward the ranchhouse.

Buck and Rose and Hopalong were sitting on the front porch, talking idly, when Rose remembered that she had some mending which had to be done, and left the two men to themselves. Neither had any reason to suspect that an ex-horse thief was stretched out on the ground under the far end of the porch listening to every word that was said.

"I was glad to read that letter from Whit," said Buck, "an' to learn that Mesquite was there, an' that Whit took a likin' to him. I figger th' kid's got a tough job on his hands. You don't even know there's any rustlin' goin' on. But don't you think it's funny that you ain't got no letter from him?"

"No, I don't think it's funny," answered Hopalong. "As I told you before, even if there is deviltry goin' on up there, he ain't hardly had time to find out anythin'. An' we do know that there's hoss stealin' goin' on up north, up around Whit. We got nothin' to do with that unless it moves down into our jurisdiction."

"You figger he's got to Hackamore yet?" asked Buck.

"Don't know. He may be playin' th' Hackamore end, or he may be out scoutin' around on th' range. Be time enough for the letter when it gets here."

"Eh, suppose no letter gets here?" said Buck slowly.

"Then I clean my guns an' go into that country to find out why it didn't."

"You won't go alone," said Buck. "Mesquite shouldn't a gone up there alone. It's too big a play for one man."

"It was th' safest play he could make," replied Hopalong, shortly. "How many times have I got to tell you that if anybody went with him, they would likely be

seen by somebody that knowed 'em, an' couple up th' Kid with this part of th' country, an' th' sheriff's office?"

"Huh!" grunted Buck, and changed his line of attack. "An' you went an' hired Shanghai without askin' me anythin' about it! I got a good mind to fire him th' first thing in th' mornin'. You know what he is!"

"I know what he was," retorted Hopalong warmly. "An' he won't be fired in th' mornin', nor any other time unless he does somethin' to deserve it. You want to drive him back to his old tricks? He's served his time an' he's squared up. He's supposed to have a new chance. I'm givin' it to him because I know that nobody else will. He's got to eat, ain't he? You let me an' him work this out by ourselves. If he's changed, he's got a job here as long as he wants it, until he dies. He's got brains aplenty, an' that's somethin' any ranch can use. He's got guts, too; I know what he went through durin' th' last part of th' ride this mornin' an' just before supper he went ridin' ag'in, to have Bill show him th' lay of th' ranch."

"He'll never be a loyal hand, an' we'll never be able to depend on him," said Buck, shaking his head in the darkness.

"Mebby not," admitted Hopalong; "but we won't *know* that till we find it out for certain, will we? Nobody ever accused th' old man of not havin' brains, an' if he still has 'em an' uses 'em, he'll know that his best bet will be to change his ways—'specially at his age. Tell you one thing; if he does make a loyal hand, he'll be deadly poison to any wide-loopers pickin' up an occasional stray cow from th' fringes of th' ranch. He knows all th' tricks of that game."

"Huh!" growled Buck. He suddenly stirred and his chair scraped as he stood up. "You talk like you've just had a nice, big feed of loco weed. This ain't th' first time I've figgered that you was crazy. I don't know what gets into you; but I can tell you one thing—when you do go loco, yo're crazier'n hell!"

"Wouldn't be surprised," retorted Hopalong. "Somethin' like that is shore bound to happen to a man who's been associatin' with you all these years. If you was just about twice as smart as you are you might make a good prairie dog!"

"Is that so?" barked Buck. "It's gettin' chilly out here, an' I'm goin' in. Shanghai workin' for th' Double Y! Th' slickest cattle thief these parts ever saw, workin' for th' Double Y, an' th' *sheriff!* Great Gawd A'mighty!"

"I ain't findin' it so chilly," chuckled Hopalong; "but I'll foller you into th' house, give you twelve men to my eleven, an' lick you good."

"You must figger yo're a right smart checker player," snorted Buck, pushing open the door.

"Seems to me that you oughta be figgerin' that way, too, by this time," retorted Hopalong, stepping across the door sill.

ROSE looked up from her mending and sighed gently. The room had been so quiet and peaceful, but now—

"I do wish you two could play checkers without wrangling all the time," she said.

Buck laughed, rested his big hand gently on her head for a moment, and glanced at the grinning Hopalong out of the corner of his eye.

"I reckon that's one of th' reasons why we like to play so much," he said, and then frowned at his friend and partner. "Well, get outa th' board, why don't you? You reckon you need my help to lift it?"

"If I needed any help I wouldn't ask you for it," growled the sheriff, scaling his big hat onto a chair across the room.

Outside the house there was silent movement at the far end of the porch, where a little darker spot on the ground seemed to ooze along the side wall foundations. After a few moments it was lost in the outer darkness.

The Shanghai who was snooping now was not the old Shanghai, snooping evilly; but a wise and canny Shanghai, striving to fit himself into the new conditions, to safeguard an honest livelihood, to earn himself security in his older years, and perhaps to gain himself some real friends as he passed down the lower reaches of the hill of life. Snooping now to acquaint himself with the new and mysterious present, to become as well

oriented now as he had been in those dangerous days long past; snooping to learn exactly what Buck and Hopalong thought of him. Buck's attitude did not surprise him, for it was the natural one. He would have been surprised if Buck had thought differently, just as he had been surprised by Hopalong's words and actions. And even now he was surprised by what Hopalong had just said. Now it seemed that the sheriff's earlier attitude toward him was a true one, that the sheriff would let him start from taw, and decide his own fate for himself. The old man glowed with gratitude.

IX

UP IN Hackamore, Mesquite was beginning to doubt the wisdom of being held prisoner by his job, and was beginning to give serious thought to quitting it so that he could move around the town and the surrounding country in search of necessary information. He was turning the matter over in his mind and wondering how to gracefully get around the play he had made about being broke, when his boss called him, and he left the work he was doing and went into the office, leaving his broom against the door casing.

"I've got to go up th' street for awhile," said Hankins. "Keep yore eye on th' office."

"All right," replied Mesquite. "Give my regards to Long John."

The old man's face flushed and he glared at his assistant.

"I will!" he snapped. "If I see him!" He strode toward the door and then stopped and turned. "I told you I don't want you to work so hard; there ain't no sense to it. No use cleanin' out them last two stalls on this side; they're handy to put things in, an' we got more stalls than we need without botherin' with them. Let 'em stay like they are. I won't be gone long."

Mesquite nodded and dropped onto the desk chair. His gaze moved idly about the little room, came to a stop on the dusty pile of illustrated weeklies on the shelf, and he lazily reached up to get one.

A number of odds and ends were on the top of the pile, and rather than move this stuff, he pulled at one of the papers which stuck out a little from the pile; and as it came out, the account book followed it and fell to the floor. That was a strange place for the account book, and it could hardly have got in there by accident. The old man must have placed it there intentionally, and he had not been drunk since that first night. There could be only one explanation for that: the old man had tried to hide it.

Mesquite leaned over, picked the book from the floor and fell to turning its pages slowly. When he reached the last page he closed the book and was about to put it back into the pile of weeklies when he suddenly realized that on no page had he found the account of Dutch Bill. It was there, of course, under some other name—but the old man had

told him that Dutch Bill had no other name so far as he knew.

He leaned back in the chair, his eyes on the book; and after a few moments he put it back where he had found it, opened the weekly and looked at one of its pages with unseeing eyes. What were the names of Dutch Bill's companions of that night?

He felt a little guilty about poking into the old man's business, but it might be something which would stand for a little poking and prying. Dutch Bill was a bully, but he would hardly carry his bullying so far as to try to escape paying his stable bills. Something was very wrong about this layout. He closed the weekly and looked at it speculatively, and then a new thought popped into his mind; if the old man returned and saw him with the paper, he might suspect that he had been found out, and that would hardly do. Mesquite stood up, lifted the top paper from the pile without spilling the odds and ends on it, and in another moment there was no sign that the pile had been disturbed.

BY NOW he had the stable in pretty good shape, all except those last two stalls, and he had intended to start on them as his next job. There was no reason to tidy them except for the sake of tidiness, and that was hardly a necessary virtue in a livery stable; and there had to be some place, as the old man had said, to store things and get them out of the way. As it was, most of his work had been done for the sake of keeping occupied.

He rubbed a hand over his chin and discovered that he needed a shave, but there would be time for that after supper, or after the stable was closed for the night. He got up from the chair and loafed to the door.

Across the street was the harness maker's shop, and the harness maker, himself was leaning in the doorway idly looking at Hankins' establishment. Mesquite nodded to him and then looked up the street. A sudden gust of wind sent the dust soaring and started it spinning. The little dust-devil sucked in small bits of litter and carried it aloft. After a heavy rain this street would be a quagmire. On the other side of the street, up on the far corner of the intersection, was the Hackamore Hotel, and his idle gaze settled on it. A man moved into sight, crossing diagonally toward the hotel and pushed in between its swinging double doors. If he wasn't Dutch Bill, then he was Bill's double. Then he closed his eyes quickly and scowled as a gust of wind enveloped him in a thick cloud of dust.

"She shore is hell when th' wind blows," called out the harness maker amicably. "An' she blows aplenty this time of th' year."

Mesquite sneezed and nodded, his gaze on the swinging doors, his thoughts on what might be going on behind them. Was it a meeting which had been arranged between Hankins and Dutch Bill?

"Yeah," he replied, glancing at the harness maker, "an' a puddle of mud when it rains."

"Which it don't do at this time of th' year," replied the harness maker, craning his neck to see what it was that his companion had been staring at; "that is, not often; but when it does rain, it pours."

Again Mesquite nodded, shifted his gaze from the Hackamore Hotel, and looked across at the harness maker. He wondered if that person could see into Hankins' office well enough to make out the stack of weeklies on the shelf, and he took a careful sight. From where he was now standing the harness maker could, perhaps, see the weeklies; but he could not see them from his bench.

"Well," said Mesquite with a smile, "just because you can loaf ain't no reason for me to. I got my pay to earn."

The harness maker laughed knowingly, and it sounded a little unpleasant.

"You have, have you?" he retorted, spitting violently into the dust. "Well, I reckon you get plenty of pay, an' you get it easy."

Mesquite curiously and thoughtfully regarded the stiff back of the disappearing old man, a little surprised by his vehemence and abrupt action. Oh, well; he had met these grumpy old fellows before. The chances were that the old man would give you the shirt off his back if you needed it. Then he became thoughtful.

The old man was located so that he could see about everything which went on about the stable. Hum!

Again Mesquite looked up the street at the Hackamore Hotel, and he wondered if Hankins was in there with Dutch Bill; perhaps the old man had not gone to the hotel, at all. Well, suppose he had, and suppose he was: what of it? What of it—unless they had met by appointment. If the appointment had any particular significance they would not have chosen Long John's bar for it. So he got good pay, and he made it easy, did he? And Dutch Bill was not paying for the stabling and feeding of his horse.

UP IN the Hackamore Hotel three men occupied the corners of a triangle and no others were present. Two points of the triangle were Dutch Bill and old man Hankins, and they were having an argument and were handicapped by the fact that they could not speak plainly. In Dutch Bill's mind was the fact that he wanted no stranger working in the livery stable. If Hankins had to have help then it would be provided for him.

"An' *I* say for you to fire him," repeated Dutch Bill flatly and with no friendliness. He could not give his real reason because of Long John's presence, and yet he should have an understandable reason to justify such a high-handed demand.

"An' *I ain't* goin' to do it," retorted the liveryman for the second time, his glass of liquor untouched on the bar beside him.

"You heard what I said," replied Dutch Bill, an ugly glint in his eyes. "You fire him an' do it pronto, if you want my trade. An' if you lose my trade, you'll lose more."

"I tell you I won't do it!" snapped the old man.

"You won't, huh?" asked Dutch Bill, and moved forward, his hand slowly rising.

"A-huh!" coughed the bartender, his unfriendly eyes on the moving puncher, and one of his hands was out of sight below the bar.

Dutch Bill stopped and looked questioningly at the interrupter.

"You cuttin' in?" he asked unpleasantly.

"This is th' Hackamore Hotel," said Long John casually. "It ain't Dalton's Saloon, an' it ain't no honkatonk. If yo're figgerin' to start a brawl, do it outside."

"That so?" sneered Dutch Bill.

"I got a job to hold down," explained Long John, his hand still under the counter. "You shouldn't make me lose it. Have a drink an' behave yoreself."

Dutch Bill studied the speaker for a moment, thoughtfully considered old man Hankins and then slowly moved up to the bar. Long John had made the affair as impersonal as he could, and Dutch had no reason to save his face.

"All right," he growled, somewhat reluctantly. "I ain't got nothin' ag'in th' old man, nor you, neither; but no man that's knocked me down can take care of my hoss, or do any business with me. You'll fire him, Hankins, an' you'll do it quick if you want my trade."

"You act like you was runnin' my business for me," retorted the old man,

hating himself because there was so much truth in his words. He reached for the liquor, raised the glass in a quick salute, and gulped its contents. At a sound in the street the bartender glanced out the front window, and in that instant the old man jerked his head significantly and nodded toward the door. "Well," he continued as Long John turned his face toward him. "I'll think it over, Bill. Now I'm goin' down th' street."

"Go with you," grunted Dutch Bill. "That's where I was headin' when I saw you come in here. Come on; an' we can continue th' argument."

Long John watched the swinging doors close behind them, then suddenly jerked something from under the bar, slipped it under his coat, and hastened to the front door.

For a moment he watched the pair, moving along in apparent amity. There were no loud words, no gestures. He sighed with relief and went back to his place, and when he rested his arms on the counter both of his hands were empty.

"Where you headin'?" asked Dutch Bill as he and his companion were passing a wide, open lot.

"Any place where we can talk," answered the old man, stopping and looking about him. "An' this looks like th' place, right here, where there ain't no ears to listen."

"I'm goin' down to Dalton's," said Dutch Bill suggestively.

"I ain't," replied the old man.

"All right, then; this'll do," growled Bill. "I'll speak my piece first because *I* got somethin' to say. We're goin' to bring in a bunch tonight, an' you got to fire that Mesquite feller outa there before we come in. That's flat!"

"You bringin' in a bunch beside them that you'll be ridin'?" demanded Hankins, his frown growing.

"Yes! Said so, didn't I?"

"Th' hull idear is loco," retorted the old man. "Yo're takin' big chances, keepin' on doin' that."

"Th' idear is smart, because nobody would be lookin' for a bold play like that," replied Dutch Bill. "We got to drive 'em too far over open range in daylight. Th' play is all right. It's all right till we get ready to shift, if we do. We're makin' a play in that direction, too; but it's a play that's got to wait on somebody else. We'll be in tonight."

"All right," acceded Hankins, grudgingly. "Then you'll be right late. After midnight. That old he-goat acrost th' street will be in bed. Mesquite will be asleep in th' house an' won't know nothin' about it. I'll throw off th' inside hasp an' use th' lock, which means th' key will be where it usually is."

"That Mesquite hombre won't be asleep in th' house!" growled Dutch Bill. "He'll be sleepin' some place else, worryin' about gettin' a new job."

"I just told you where he'll be!" said Hankins. "I ain't goin' to fire that lad, not till I has to. An' I'll be th' judge of that. I've took a likin' to him, an' he likes me. Sweep up th' hair, like you allus do, an' nobody will be knowin' anythin' about it."

Dutch Bill was staring at his companion through narrowed lids.

"I'm beginnin' to figger you need a lesson," he said. "You ain't forgot who's runnin' this game, have you?"

"No, I ain't," retorted the old man. "Somethin' may happen to me, of course. If it does, I'll lay you a bet that th' same thing will happen to somebody else.

Mesquite will be right where *I* said he will be. All you got to do is sweep up them hairs an' throw 'em outside."

"Yeah?" growled Dutch Bill ironically. "What about th' fresh broom marks on that littered floor?"

"There won't be any because th' floor won't be littered," replied Hankins. "He keeps th' place swept neat as a pin. Sweeps it near every day. I told him it was foolish to do it, but now I know it ain't. You let me try my way first. I ain't goin' to fire that lad till I has to."

"Huh!" sneered Dutch Bill, but he knew that the old man was adamant. "Yo're way will work out all right till th' first time it don't. All right, you old fool; she goes as you say. But th' first time it don't work, we'll stop his mouth, an' stop it permanent." He stepped forward as his companion started to move on. "Better not part here. You step into Tom's an' buy somethin' you don't want, an' I'll keep on goin' to Dalton's. Do as you said about th' stable door."

HANKINS nodded and a few moments later stepped into the general store while his companion kept on going toward his favorite saloon.

The proprietor of the store stepped back hastily from the grimy window and leaned over a keg of nails. At the sound of steps he looked up, and a smile slipped across his face.

"Hell, Joe, you old hellion!" he said.

"Hello, Tom, you old halfbreed. You got any lead rivets?"

"*Lead* rivets? Hell, no: ain't never heard of 'em!" exclaimed the storekeeper.

"Nobody out in this part of th' country ever has anythin' a man wants," growled Hankins, and turned on his heel to go out again.

"Wait a minute!" cried Tom. "What fool idear you got in yore head now? I got copper rivets, an' soft iron rivets. Hell, man, they oughta be all right. I never even heard of lead rivets! They just wouldn't hold nothin'!"

"That's just why I want 'em!" snapped the liveryman, scowling fiercely, and the door slammed resoundingly after him.

The storekeeper's face expressed great puzzlement, and he scratched his head in vain.

"Ketch me buyin' somethin' I don't want," muttered Hankins, stumping down the street.

X

MESQUITE got up out of the chair as his boss entered the office.

"Well," he said, smilingly, "see anybody you knew?"

"Yep," answered the old man, his seamed face trying to smile. "Saw Long John, Dutch Bill, merchant Tom and put away two drinks which fit me right snug. Any customers?"

"Not so far," answered Mesquite, frowning a little. "Dutch Bill still want you to fire me?"

"Naw," chuckled the old man. "He's got all over that idear. Anyhow, you couldn't blame him, hardly. You knocked him down, didn't you? You reckon folks like to be knocked down?"

"Reckon not," answered Mesquite in a low voice, remembering that Dutch Bill's demand for his being fired had come before the knockdown. He was trying to read the old face in front of him. "How come, then, that he changed his mind?"

"Because I changed it for him," answered Hankins, chuckling. "He ain't such a bad feller when you know him well. But it's a right good idear to let him alone if he don't like you; an' he don't like you a hell of a lot."

"That goes both ways," growled Mesquite.

"You got yore work done?" demanded the old man.

"No. It's where I left it when you called me into th' office," answered Mes-

quite. "Got a little sweepin' to do."

"Well, I'm back ag'in," said the liveryman, moving around the desk toward the chair behind it. As he passed the inner door he saw the broom where his assistant had left it, and waved a careless hand toward it. "All right; start in where you left off, though I reckon it's good enough as it is."

The rest of the day was like other days. A few customers left their horses and came for them later on. Suppertime came and found two hungry men ready to eat. The evening was uneventful and closing time came at last. Mesquite closed the big doors and paused to glance into the office, where his boss sat behind the desk and read an old paper under the soft, mellow light of a kerosene lamp. The old man did not seem to have a worry in the world.

"I've closed th' big door," reported the stable hand. "Anythin' else you want me to do?"

Hankins lowered the paper, rubbed his eyes and shook his head.

"No," he said. "Turn in if you want. I reckon I won't be far behind you." He raised the paper again and searched for the place. Finding it, he grunted his satisfaction and went on reading. An hour later he blew out the lamp, stepped to the office door and looked idly up and down the street. The harness maker's shop and the rest of the street was in quiet and darkness. He stepped to the street and was gone for a few moments. When he returned he closed and locked the office door, threw off the hasp on the big stable door and then made his way slowly and cautiously through the pitch dark stable toward the faint rectangle of light at the far end. This door he closed and locked behind him, and in a moment more the little house swallowed him.

IN THE morning, breakfast over and the dishes washed and stacked on the table, Mesquite left the little house and made his way to the stable. His boss was already in the office. As he passed the first box stall he reached his hand in for the broom. It was not where he had placed it. Surprised, he stuck his head in through the doorway and looked. The broom was not there. He looked to the other side and there was the broom, leaning against the front wall of the stall.

He must be going loco. He carefully ran back in his mind, picturing himself and the broom when he had placed it in the stall the evening before. There was no question about it; it was not where he had left it. At least twice a day he put the broom away, and always the same way. He had a trick of performing physical acts in the simplest manner, and in putting the broom away there was no variance. He had been going toward the rear of the building on his way to the little house to start supper. He was right-handed, and a right-handed man, in such a situation would naturally place the broom on the left hand side of the opening. It was easier to do it that way because it required less movements and could be done almost without stopping.

Here it was, however, on the other side, which would have made a right-handed man step into the doorway and turn around. He would also have to shift it to his other hand to do the job without further movements. Of course, if he had been coming from the other direction, from the rear of the building toward the front—but he had not done this.

There was no particular importance in the shifting of a broom, but it was a puzzle to play with, to follow out, something to think about which appealed to a man skilled in reading sign; and the more he thought about it the more certain he was that the broom had been shifted, and perhaps used, by a left-handed man, or by a right-handed man coming from the rear of the stable. This

man had used the broom and had put it back where he had found it, as he supposed. He chuckled to himself—perhaps the old man had used it. Then the chuckles died; Hankins was right-handed. It was even money that someone had been in the stable last night and had used that broom. Who? Why? The stable had been locked, and he believed that he would have heard the old man if he had got up in the night and left the house. He left the broom where it stood and walked on toward the front of the building, stopping in the office door.

"You seen th' broom this mornin'?" he asked, a little fretfully.

"Broom?" repeated the old man, and paused while his mind ran over the possibilities in this innocent question; and in his mind the possibilities suddenly developed. Damn it all, even a broom was dangerous! Even a damn' broom had to be explained away. He turned a bland and smiling face to his stablehand. "Shore, why?" For an instant his eyes became secretive.

"I was wonderin' if I was gettin' forgetful," explained Mesquite with a faint grin. "It wasn't where I thought I put it, that's all."

"Now, where did I put it?" growled the liveryman, scratching his head. "Damn' if I remember. Some stall, mebby. I was goin' to use it, saw it wasn't needed before I got ten feet, an' put it in some stall, I think. What of it? I put it *some*where!"

"All right," replied Mesquite with a smile. That ten feet would have put it in another stall, but the broom was not in another stall. "I'll find it if you didn't eat it."

"Well, I might a et it, for all I know, I'm gettin' so damn' absent minded; but I figger I didn't."

MESQUITE turned from the door, still childishly occupied in the great mystery of who moved the broom; and then the light, streaming in through the big, rear doorway, picked out some scattered hairs on the rough board floor and tried to make halos out of them. They reflected the light, looked twice as thick, and fairly shone.

Mesquite grunted; a floor as rough as that simply could not be swept clean. But it was strange he had not noticed them before, because there were so many of them. Just the way the light shone on them, perhaps. He bent down to have a closer look at them, although for a moment he could not tell why, unless it was just due to his training. And then he knew.

When he used the broom he always started at the front door and swept toward the rear. These hairs had been caught by splinters which pointed in the wrong direction. They had been swept toward the front of the stable instead of in the other direction. Now he was into this puzzle in earnest, intrigued by its unraveling. When his Ute-trained father had taught him sign reading, he had done a good job.

Behind him, in the office, the old man sighed wearily, his face lined with trouble. He was not exulting his triumph in explaining away a clue to last night's activities, but was regretting it; regretting the need to trick a man whom he had vaguely hoped would get him, somehow, out of the mess he was in; to lie to and trick a man who was friendly to him. He would go out and have a drink or two; things might look better after that.

He got to his feet, moved to the door and stuck his head out into the stable. Mesquite, on his knees, was picking horse hair from the grip of the splinters and looking closely at them, so preoccupied that he did not hear his employer's light steps. Hankins jerked his head back and moved silently to his chair. Then he noisily pushed the chair back and spoke loudly.

"Mesquite!" he called, and again he walked to the side door. When he stuck his head out this time he saw the stableman sweeping diligently.

"Found it, huh?" asked Hankins, nodding at the broom.

"Found it," repeated Mesquite, "right where you put it," and he carelessly waved a hand at the wrong stall.

"Yeah," said the old man with a grin. "I remember, now. I started toward th' back yard an' put th' broom in that stall. I'm goin' out for a little while," he added, and turned back into the office. He did not know that his hired man was standing like a statue, thinking instead of sweeping; did not know that he had talked too much, that he had made the common mistake of volunteering information.

Hankins walked slowly up the street, and the Hackamore Hotel invited him, but he shook his head. Why had he ever let himself get into this fix? Why hadn't he said No in the beginning, and risked that they would not carry out their threats? There were other stables in town. After all, he was an old man, with the best of his life behind him, and he did not have, at best, many more years to live; but the less there were remaining to him, the more precious they somehow seemed to be.

He glanced again at the Hackamore. Long John would be standing behind the bar; Long John, who always begrudged him his third glass of liquor for fear it would loosen his tongue, and who now was beginning to begrudge him his second. To hell with Long John. He knew where he would go, and where they would be glad for him to drink all he wanted, and go there he did.

HE HAD his two drinks and then a third. They put life into him and made him feel much better. He could talk to this bartender without being criticized, and it made him feel more comfortable. The minutes slipped past, and then in the mirror he saw Dutch Bill come in the back door and head for the bar. He did not like Dutch very much, but the three drinks had mellowed him, and perhaps Dutch was better than he had thought. Anyhow, a man should not drink alone. He raised a hand in salutation and then waved it toward a table as he turned his head toward the bartender.

"Gimme a bottle an' a couple of glasses," he said. "It's more comfortable to drink sittin' down."

Dutch Bill chose a table in a far corner, and took the chair which was in the corner. The whole room, with its doors and windows, was in the field of his vision. He nodded as Hankins placed bottle and glasses on the table and dropped rather heavily onto a chair.

"Don't reckon I can take th' time for no real session," said Dutch Bill. "I got a long ride to make, whether I want to or not, an' I got to start purty soon; but I'll have a few with you." He reached out, picked up the glass the old man had filled, raised it in salute and downed its contents. He was a gulper rather than a taster. He cleared his throat and smiled. "Does a man good, don't it?"

Hankins chuckled his agreement and poured again, and this time spilled some of it. Dutch Bill began to fidget, remembering the ride he had ahead of him, and that time was passing. He suddenly stood up, lifted the bottle and filled the old man's glass again.

"I got to go," he said. "You change

yore mind about firin' that Mesquite hombre?" He did not wait for an answer, but turned and strode out of the door toward the corral.

Hankins sat up suddenly and laughed. He was recalling the episode of the broom and admiring his own quick wit. It was too good to be kept a secret. He staggered to the door and reached the corral as Dutch Bill was mounting, and at his shout and upraised hand the rider checked the already moving horse, and listened to what the man on foot was saying about the misplaced broom, and about Mesquite kneeling on the stable floor picking horse hairs from the splinters, and how intent he had been while he studied them. And then the old man leaned against the corral and laughed until tears formed in his eyes.

Dutch Bill laughed, too, but only with his mouth. As he looked down at the maudlin old man his hand crept toward the holster, but stopped. He had a play in mind and if it went through he would have no more use for the liveryman. Be time enough then. He swung the horse around toward the stable, and changed his mind; he had to make his ride, and the sooner he started the sooner he would be back. A few hours would make no difference; there would be no more horse hairs plucked from the splinters of the stable floor. The horse leaped forward and the sound of its hammering hoofs slowly died out west of town.

Hankins pushed against the corral and then stumbled and lurched back to the saloon, and the next thing he knew, and he was not quite certain of that, was that he was sitting on the single step before his office door, trying to remember who it was had brought him home.

XI

MESQUITE, broom in hand, stood for a moment digesting his employer's words. He did not hear the old man leave the office, did not know that he had gone. From the consideration of the misplaced broom and what it told him, his mind ran back to the account book, to the horse hairs, and now he knew they had not been there the day before. He ran back to that first morning in the little house, when Hankins awoke to find that he had hired a stableman; to the varying expressions on the old man's face, to his words.

Who, besides himself and Hankins would use the broom, especially at night? Who would have occasion to, to need to? How had the new hairs come to be on the floor? Why had Hankins lied? Why had the old man's face shown sudden hope that first morning? There was something here which evaded him. What it was he did not know but he felt certain that it existed. Being so carefully hidden, so evasive, it must be something which would not stand public knowledge, something furtive and outside the law. In this part of the country it could scarcely be anything but rustling.

He placed the broom against a stall and walked to the front of the building, his eyes searching every inch of the floor. He glanced into the office and saw that it was empty, and then stopped in the big doorway to lean lazily against the casing and look speculatively up the street. His thoughts ran on and on, toying with the facts he had, playing with suspicions, explanations; trying to fit together these fragmentary parts of the puzzle. Broom, hairs, lies, evasions, the account book.

Perhaps he was not wasting time, restricted by his job from making excursions afield. Perhaps he was near the hub of these mysteries, or at least on one of the spokes. It looked like cattle thieves were using this stable for a rendezvous, and if that were so he was just about where he wanted to be. He slowly shifted his gaze from the Hackamore Hotel and looked across the street at the

harness maker's shop. Its proprietor was at his bench, barely to be seen through the grimy window. During daylight the old man saw almost everything which went on about the stable; perhaps he did not sleep well nights! Mesquite pushed away from the casing and slowly sauntered across the dusty street.

The harness maker looked up from his work, grunted a dubious greeting and looked down again, the thin bristle ends of the two threads deftly meeting and passing each other in the hole in the leather. He jerked his hands apart and reached for the awl. As he did so he glanced up again.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, using the awl and laying it down again to pick up the two bristles.

"Nothin' right now," answered Mesquite, seating himself on a chair without a back. "I got a little lonesome, saw you over here, an' just dropped in."

The workman grasped the projecting ends of the bristles, pulled them through and clear, gripped the threads firmly and again jerked his hands apart. He shifted the trace in a vise, took a new grip and reached for two new threads.

"Saw you leanin' ag'in th' door," said the harness maker, picking up the awl.

"Yes," said Mesquite, smiling. "That's a good job yo're doin'."

"Try to make 'em all good," grunted the leatherworker without looking up. "Good work means customers; customers mean more work. It goes in a circle, like a dog chasin' his tail." The new threads now in play, he cut off the ends of the other pair. "I never had th' knack of gettin' my livin' without workin' for it, workin' hard for it."

Mesquite thought that he detected a slight emphasis on the last few words, but gave no sign of it.

"Well, most folks earn their livin' that way," he said with a laugh.

"Huh!" sneered the harness maker, reaching for the awl. He pushed it through rather viciously. "I was thinkin' of work, an' not risk."

"Yeah?" politely inquired the visitor, feeling that the conversation was heading in the direction he wished; but he was wrong, for his host turned the talk, or what there was of it, into harmless channels and kept it there. After a little of this futile conversation Mesquite arose, stretched, and walked slowly toward the door. "So long," he said. "I better be gettin' back."

"Yeah," replied the harness maker without looking up. "So long."

Mesquite walked thoughtfully across the street and into the stable, and went on toward the rear. He stopped and looked down at the suspicious hairs, and then squatted and carefully plucked them from the grip of the splinters until there were none left, and he did the same thing at several other places on the floor. He laughed suddenly and threw the handful of hair into a stall. Dumb. Just plain dumb. Trying to find a hard and complicated answer to a puzzle so easy that it almost shouted at him. Of course! All the little pieces fitted nicely together now, but now it was just one part of a bigger puzzle, a puzzle of where and how.

HE picked up the broom and began to sweep again, just going through the motions, until he was interrupted by two horsemen who left him their mounts and walked up the street. Time rolled past and brought the lunch hour near, and as Mesquite was about to start for the kitchen, he heard heavy, irregular steps on the street, a few words, and then lighter and regular steps rapidly dying out. Old man Hankins was half sitting, half lying on the stoop. At a sound from across the street Mesquite glanced that way and saw the harness maker standing in his door, slowly shaking his head.

Mesquite sighed, jammed his fists on his hips and looked down on the wreck. Then he took hold of his boss, threw him

across a shoulder and carried him through the stable and into the house. There he plumped the old man into a chair, straightened him up, and stepped back, The rough handling shook Hankins back to a momentary interest in things about him.

"Drunk ag'in, you old fool," he mumbled.

"Yeah. You oughta be proud of yoreself," growled Mesquite.

"Huh?" muttered the wreck, opening his eyes and trying to focus them on the speaker. "Huh? What say?"

Suddenly Mesquite smiled.

"Stealin' my broom, scatterin' hoss hair where I just swept," he accused, leveling a rigid forefinger at the old man. "You oughta be ashamed of yoreself to fool me like that."

"He, he, he!" laughed the old man, almost contorted by mirth. "Did fool you, huh? He, he, he! Fooled you! *I* didn't touch th' damn broom, but I know who did. *I* didn't drop no hoss hair," and he rocked to and fro in senseless laughter, and would have fallen from the chair if his hired hand had not grabbed him and propped him up again.

"Reckon yo're smart, don't you?" said Mesquite with simulated anger as he stepped back. "Reckon it's smart to fool me, don't you? I bet you don't even know their names! *Now,* how smart are you?"

"Huh!" grunted Hankins, slobbering. He bent his head uncertainly and rubbed his wet chin with the back of a grimy hand. Then his eyes closed and he started to fold up, falling forward slowly.

Again Mesquite grabbed him and straightened him back in the chair. After waiting a few moments with his hands on the old man's shoulders he shook his head, picked him up and carried him into the bedroom, where he undressed him, put him into bed and again pinned the curtains shut.

Stepping into the kitchen, Mesquite closed the door behind him, the action purely one of habit. His mind was occupied in searching for the answers to the new puzzle. Suddenly he snapped out of his preoccupation and walked over to the opposite wall, where he took down his second gunbelt. Swinging it around him, he buckled it and then began to prepare his noon meal. There was a grim smile of satisfaction on his face, for now he did not believe that it was at all necessary for him to quit his job and to ride around the country. Once he knew what there was to be known about Dutch Bill, he would come mighty close to knowing what he had been sent up here to find out.

The meal over, he went out to the office, found a soiled piece of cheap paper and a grimy envelope, and wrote a letter addressed to Rick Bradley at Twin River, Montana. There was not much to tell, but there was something, and he felt that Hopalong should know where he was and what he was doing. When it was finished he sealed it and put it in his pocket. After dark would be time enough to mail it. As a matter of fact, it would not be time to mail it before dark, and the darker and the later, the better. He was doing too well to take unnecessary chances.

THE afternoon passed uneventfully. He took care of the horses brought in, saddled those that were taken out, examined the account book with more care, and killed the rest of the time as best he could. When supper time rolled around he took a look at his prostrate boss and cooked a meal for one.

The evening passed as uneventfully as the afternoon and at long last came closing time. Anyone wanting his horse after the stable was locked was supposed to go around to the little house, hammer on the door and make his wants known; but that would not happen tonight because there were no customers' horses in the stable, just the two belonging to Hankins and himself.

Mesquite locked up, slipped the keys into a pocket and wandered up the street.

The building housing the post office was closed, but the slot cut into the front door was all he needed. Across the street and to his left was a lighted saloon. Above its windows, halfway up the top of the false front and barely readable in the dim, reflected light was a faded legend: DALTON'S. The name meant nothing to him then, and he walked back the way he had come without giving it a second glance, until he stood on the corner opposite the Hackamore Hotel. Nodding his head gently, he stepped across the street and pushed through the swinging doors.

Long John was mopping spilled liquor from the bar and glanced up as the doors swung shut behind the newcomer. A dozen or more men were in the big room. A poker game was going on in a far corner in a fog of smoke, and it must have been more friendly than deadly, judging from the banter and laughter. Several men were leaning back in their chairs against the wall and carrying on a desultory conversation. Mesquite glanced back to the poker game and decided that the present dealer had never done any hard work with his hands. Either a gambler or a traveling man he guessed. Mesquite photographed the whole scene with one slow look and he knew that he never had seen one of the men before. He had not paused in his slow advance, and a few

more steps brought him to the edge of the bar, where he nodded to the tall man behind it. Long John had plunged the bar cloth into a pail of water and was now wringing it out.

"Have a cigar with me," invited Mesquite, resting his forearms on the counter. Since he now had a job, and perhaps a pay-day he did not have to pretend that he was dead broke.

Long John looked at him for a moment, nodded, pushed out a box of cigars, put it on the back-bar again, tossed the coin in a box and struck a match. While it burned green and fizzled and stank he held it out in front of him, but when the color of the flame changed he reached out and held it to Mesquite's cigar.

"Old man turned in?" he asked, lighting his own cigar.

"Yeah," grunted Mesquite. He sighed wearily. "He turned in about mid-mornin', th' old fool."

The bartender frowned slightly and raised his eyebrows.

"Ag'in, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah; ag'in," growled Mesquite. "Somebody brought him home an' dumped him on th' doorstep. He musta met friends."

THE bartender nodded slowly in agreement, but the frown had grown.

"Don't know that I'd go so far as to call 'em friends," he said. "You toted him in, undressed, put him to bed an' pinned shut th' curtains, I reckon?" He smiled.

Mesquite nodded, and looked slowly around the room again. The smoke had grown thicker over the poker table and someone was reaching for a bottle. Then he turned his head slowly and looked squarely into the bartender's eyes.

"Yo're a friend of Hankins, I figger," he said in a low voice.

"That's right," grunted Long John.

"You hear lots of things, standin' here behind th' bar, but you don't say nothin'," stated Mesquite, smiling coldly.

"That's a right important part of th' job," replied Long John, also smiling.

"An' that goes for everybody on this side of th' counter, huh?" asked Mesquite, still looking searchingly into Long John's eyes.

"Everybody," grunted the bartender.

"That's good enough for me," said Mesquite. "Then, of course, you wouldn't know how it is that certain hombres keep their hosses in our stable, an' don't pay one damn' red cent for it?"

"Why, no," drawled Long John, his gaze unwavering, his expression unchanged. "Seein' that I don't know, I'm dead shore that I wouldn't ask nobody no questions about it. Dead shore. An' if I did ask 'em, I'm also dead shore I wouldn't ask 'em in Dalton's saloon. It's a tough dump."

"Never *heard* of it," replied Mesquite. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and it reminded him that he had forgotten to shave. "If you wanted to see Butch Bill some day, about where would you look?"

"I figger I'll never want to see him in a hurry," replied Long John; "but if I did I'd look in some tough saloon. There's usually three or four of his friends with him."

"You bein' a friend of Hankins, an' him now bein' dead drunk, you figger there's anythin' you oughta tell me?" asked Mesquite, again trying to read his companion's eyes.

"Only that I wouldn't go huntin' Dutch Bill," answered Long John. "Nice night, though a mite cool for this time of th' year."

"I don't believe that I'd go huntin' for him, myself," replied Mesquite, smiling thinly, "seein' that I don't care whether I see him or not. He changed his mind about havin' me fired outa my job. Oh, well, reckon I'll wander around town an' look it over. Ain't had a chance to since I got here. Oh, by th' way—you wouldn't be knowin' what saloon it is where th' old man gets so damn' much liquor poured into him, would you?"

Long John gently shook his head.

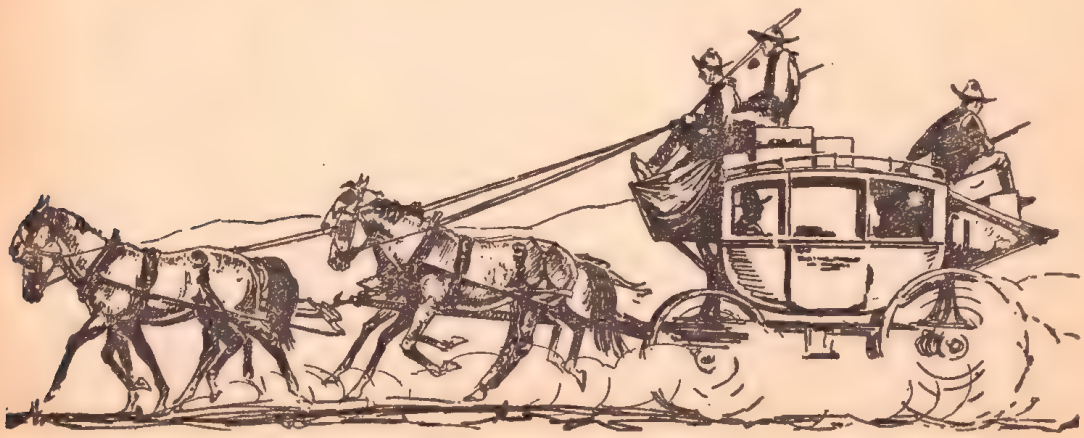
"No, I wouldn't be knowin' that," he answered.

"All right," grunted Mesquite, turning from the bar. "Good night. I'll mebby see you ag'in soon."

"Good night," replied Long John. He was moving a fresh cloth slowly back and forth on the bar, his face studiously devoid of expression, but his eyes were very bright.

He watched his companion push slowly from the bar and walk slowly toward the door, and his eyes dropped to the gently swinging butts of the two, low-hung guns. He had spent his whole life, and it had been a hard one, on the frontier and he thought that he knew a capable, deadly gunman when he saw one. He let loose of the bar cloth, leaned gently against the edge of the back-bar and thoughtfully regarded the polished surface in front of him, and something which he seemed to see there made him smile.

(*Part III in the next* WEST



After Twenty Years in the Mounted, Jim Marsh Knew a Good Man When He Saw One

Sergeant Jim Invests

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of "Guardian Angel," "The Same Old Job," etc.

NOT until he received that letter from Mary Cramer did Jim Marsh realize how the years were creeping up on him. Straight and clear-eyed in his police uniform—with the sergeant's chevrons on his right arm and his war-ribbons on his left breast—Jim Marsh told himself he was as good a man as he ever was. Perhaps he *was* a bit thicker in the waist and thinner in the hair, but one expected these things. A man didn't hell around at forty-four as he did at twenty-two; and thinning hair was not always a sign of age. But, on the other hand, there was the letter as proof:

"Bob has been transferred to the branch of the Bank at Nelson Landing. He is young, impressionable, and, I'm afraid, inclined to be reckless. For old time's sake, Jim, I know you'll do me a favor, and the favor is that you'll keep an eye on him. This is his first trip away from home, and, mother-like, I'm inclined to worry. But why should I worry with you on the spot? Perhaps, Jim, I'm taking a lot for granted——"

The letter ran on, but Jim Marsh skipped to the signature. Her son, Bob—working in the bank! Grown up, out in the world; with Jim himself old enough to be the kid's father!

It was like the shock of cold water in the face. Mary Cramer he had always pictured as the girl he used to know—nineteen, slim, laughing-eyed. That she, too, had grown up to mother a son of that age seemed unbelievable.

Jim turned to the letter again. This time he read it through to the end. And a harshness formed about the lines of his mouth.

The letter awoke memories none too pleasant. Memories not only of Mary Cramer but also of he himself. Of a high-flying buckaroo with a nose for liquor and a yen for trouble. Of a girl's entreaties that he try to do something with the life before him. Of an answering laugh; and more liquor; and a girl's broken heart at the end of it. And then the war, where one sobered up and tried to forget——

Yeah; and that was twenty-two years ago. Now Mary was asking him to keep an eye on young Bob. Young Bob, who might have been his own son.

JIM MARSH stood up, straightened his tunic and crossed to the window. Beyond the detachment picket-fence began the straggling Landing—log shacks, newly-erected and unpainted lumber buildings; the hovels of the half-breeds and the teepees of the Crees. Across the valley rose hills of fire-killed spruce. Between, was the river, flowing down to the North. But Jim Marsh saw nothing of this. He was thinking of young Bob, and the letter. "Bob—is inclined to be reckless—"

Well, if a man were inclined to be reckless, this was the place to come. Recklessness had prompted Hearne, Thompson and Fraser to force a way into the country and carve their names on the annals of time. Recklessness had prompted Punch Dickens and Wop May to blaze an air trail to the shores of the Arctic. And nothing but recklessness had brought wealth and international fame to Labine and his associates in their radium-hunt on the shores of far-off Bear Lake. Recklessness; controlled recklessness. But perhaps this was not the kind of thing that Mary Cramer was alluding to. Perhaps it was the other kind, the kind that Jim Marsh knew all about from his own youth. And a man could find that, also. Gold was down the river; and following it came its attendants—liquor, crime, the madness of a wild frontier.

Jim Marsh turned from the window, put on his Stetson and headed towards the town. Almost a month he had been away on patrol, and in a month anything could have happened. Prospectors went down the river daily; men died; others came in to take their place.

But Jim Marsh noticed other changes. A hardware store had gone up in his absence, so had also a couple of restaurants and something that might have been a saloon. This latter building called itself "The Oasis;" and Jim decided to give it the once-over at the earliest possible moment. But at the immediate moment something else occurred. Three men stepped out and almost bumped into him as he passed the door. He glanced at them, raised an eyebrow and stopped abruptly.

Two of them interested him little but the third he knew of old. Thumb hooked in a tunic-flap, he gave this third man a greeting.

"Welcome to Nelson Landing, Smoky. Welcome—as long as you toe the line!"

Short, heavy-jawed, mean-eyed, the man Smoky scowled for an instant, then fought a crooked grin to his lips.

"Thasso? And ain't that great! And what might happen if we don't 'toe the line'?"

"Same as happened before—free board for another long stretch."

Smoky shot a glance at his two companions. One could have been Smoky himself in oversize—equally mean, equally crooked-faced. The other man Jim judged to a hair-trigger Finn. Backed by their presence, Smoky snarled truculently.

"How'd you bulls like to mind yer own business a while? It ain't hard, and it sure pays dividends!"

Jim gave a grin. "Same old Smoky carrying the same old chip! But there's nothing to row about. The Golden Rule applies in Nelson Landing just as much as it does in Edmonton. Follow its teachings, and you'll go a long way. Of course," he added, "disregard them, and

you'll go just as far. But south!"

Smoky's jet eyes were venomous as a snake's.

"Why, you windjammin' bunch o'——"

"Never mind the thanks," broke in Jim Marsh hastily. "The advice is free." And he nodded, turned on his heel and continued his walk down the street.

THE Bank of Commerce occupied a lumber building on the far side of town. A two-story affair, rooms above accommodated the small staff. Jim was within fifty feet of the place when a man came out and locked the door. A glance at his strap-watch showed Jim the time to be four-thirty, and he knew the business of the bank was concluded for the balance of the day.

Putting his keys in his pocket, the chap in the doorway turned, and Jim knew he need look no further for Bob Cramer. He was a tall youngster, husky, and well-knit. A glance at him, and Jim put out his hand.

"Bob Cramer?"

The youngster smiled. "Sure. And you're Sergeant Marsh."

"Guessed right, eh?"

"No guesswork at all. Mother said I'd find you here."

The word hit Jim. "Mother." It sounded sort of queer. He asked a question that had him puzzled.

"And how did she know you'd find me here?"

"No secret about it," grinned young Bob. "Your photo was in all the papers after you arrested those murderers on Rocky Lake last fall."

Jim gave a tolerant smile and fell into step with the youth as he turned from the bank. "Think you'll like this place?"

Bob Cramer shrugged. "Might; anywhere but on the job I've got. But that's not living. I want to get out; go after the gold with the rest of the boys!"

Jim gave him a sidelong glance. There were the eyes, the nose, the set of the head — nineteen years of age, and his mother in masculine form. Jim sighed, frowned. "Well, I dunno." He thrust out his chin in the general direction of the North. "There isn't so much there worth grieving over. A lot of hardship, a lot of work, and little at the end of it."

"But what of the chaps who are striking it lucky?"

"Who are?" countered Jim. "One out of every five hundred. The rest won't get their grubstakes back. They'll stay there, try trapping and go broke."

"All of 'em?"

"Well; perhaps ten will make a go of it. And of the ten, five will turn practically Indian—only worse."

Bob Cramer grinned. "You're an optimist!"

"I'm a realist. But that's not for you. You've education, and a job that'll get you somewhere. Hang to it, and you won't be sorry."

They argued till, with a roar and a blast, a plane rose from the river and headed northward. As it diminished, bug-like, against the sky, Bob Cramer's eyes burned.

"There's me—in that plane! Wait till I get a grubstake!"

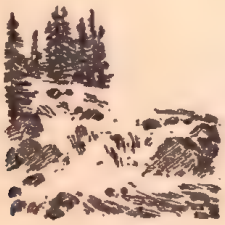
"Sure!" approved Jim. "But wait till you get it."

DURING the next month or so, Jim Marsh saw a lot of Bob Cramer. Occasionally they ate together at one of the restaurants; occasionally the younger man came up to the detachment. And always Bob's talk was the same—the irksomeness of the bank, the call of adventure, the slow passage of time while the grubstake grew. Jim understood now what Mary had meant by his recklessness. Young Bob would have gone on a shoe-string, bucked his luck and chanced the rest. And Jim wondered. Certainly the boy did not get this streak from his mother; his father must bear the blame. Jim knew the father, and all down the

years had borne him little love. Bob Cramer, senior, was a land-broker; cold-blooded, but a plunger withal. His plunging had always brought him money, however; more money than Jim, on his sergeant's pay could ever earn. The gambling streak in the father must be coming out in the son.

But under the stress of frontier work and distant patrols, Jim's visits with Bob grew fewer. The kid seemed to be on the right track, and Jim had nothing to worry about. More concrete were the worries over Smoky Jeffrys and his ilk.

Smoky was a thorn in Jim Marsh's side. He and his pals continued to hang on at the Landing without working or justifying their existence. On the other hand, there had been sporadic crimes—petty thievery, larger hold-ups, a bit of pickpocketing—that could well have been laid to Smoky's door. It worried Jim Marsh. Grimly he swore that the next finger he put on Smoky would be the last. Given the chance, Smoky would be making little ones out of big ones for ten years to come.



Then Jim had the talk with old Joe Neal.

Joe Neal was the patriarch of Nelson Landing. Squatter, one-time trader but now retired on apparently ample means, old Joe spent his evening years drifting around town, gleaning gossip and imparting counsel. One evening he came to the detachment, dropped into a chair and wanted to know the good word.

Jim told him all he knew, and waited for the exchange of confidence. In his circumlocutory manner, old Joe began with generalities. He discussed youth, and the wildness of it; cast out hints and became bafflingly vague. Suddenly—

"A fifty-dollar-a-month-job don't call for no fifty-a-night jackpot, does she, Sergeant?" he demanded.

Jim frowned, and didn't see how it could. He waited in silence for the old man to go on.

"And when a feller loses consistent on that there wage, he's either got a private income or a nest-egg stored away. Ain't it so?"

Jim agreed again, puzzled by old Joe's wanderings.

"Yeah; then I'm givin' you a hunk of advice." But once more the old man paused, this time to fish out a sulphur match and probe with it into the recesses of a hairy ear. "If I knewd a young feller was headed fer trouble, I'd figure it was up to someone to tell him about it. It ain't my job, but it might be yours. One thing," and he became suddenly direct, "if it ain't now, it surer'n hell one day will be. And," bluntly, "I'm referrin' to young Cramer in the bank."

Jim stiffened and a chill ran up his spine. "What?" he barked. "You mean he's gambling—and losing heavily?"

"Now, now!" soothed old Joe. "Ain't no need to holler. When you reach my age——"

"Blast your age!" retorted Jim. "Get on with the yarn!"

"There ain't no yarn!" Old Joe became sulkily grumpy. "I like the kid, and if y' think——"

"Don't I like him? And it's because I like him that I want to know what you're drooling about. Get on and tell me."

Somewhat mollified, the old man obliged. Appalled, Jim listened to the story of a nightly poker-game in the back-room of "The Oasis;" of Smoky Jeffrys and his mates sitting in; and of Bob Cramer losing more money than he could afford to lose. At the conclusion of it he shook his head.

"Something off-color, Dad. Given the

chance, the kid's as good as they come. But he's young, and too much of a plunger to suit me. I'll drop around and have a talk with him, right now. Yeah; I'll catch him before he starts another night of it."

AS HAD happened once before, Jim met Bob Cramer coming towards him as soon as he reached the main part of the town. This time, however, Bob Cramer crossed the street as though deliberately trying to avoid the meeting. But Jim forestalled him.

"And how's the boy today?" he asked. Really, there was no need of the question. Bob Cramer may have been in the best of health but he did not look it. There was a pallor to his face, a hint of puffiness around his eyes and, what Jim liked least of all, a certain hesitancy of manner. But the youth managed to summon a smile.

"Not too bad—all things considered."

Jim nodded. "Tell you why I looked you up—I'm taking a ten-day patrol into

the Lynx Lake country and I thought you'd like to come along. Suppose you get holidays once in a while?"

There was a momentary flare of eagerness in Cramer's eyes; but as suddenly the flare went out.

"Like to," he admitted. "But it can't be done. Thompson, the manager, is sick; which leaves just Brown and me."

Jim grunted. "Too bad. It would have given you a chance to see what it's like Back o' Beyond. You've always wanted that."

He fell into step with him, and when they reached a restaurant invited him to come in for a cup of coffee. Cramer would have refused, but Jim was too insistent.

There were but three men in the place, eating at the counter. Jim chose a booth, sat down and waved Cramer to a seat opposite him. With their order taken, he began to speak, bluntly, and straight.

"There was one more reason, Bob, why I wanted you along on this trip. It would have given you a chance to forget Smoky Jeffrys and his poker-game."

Bob Cramer looked up sharply. He frowned.

"What d'you mean—Smoky and his poker-game?"

Jim studied him intently for a moment. "No need to bluff, Bob. I know pretty much all that's been going on. You want a grubstake, all right, but you won't get it playing with Smoky Jeffrys."

Bob Cramer's expression altered. The face became harsh, the lips sneering.

"That's what you think! I took Smoky for a ride the first few nights, and I can do it again."

"Don't be a fool!" Jim was curtly contemptuous. "You may have won at the beginning, but that was sucker's luck. How much," he demanded, "are you down right now?"

"How much? Well, maybe fifty dollars. Maybe seventy-five."

Jim could not believe this, but neither could he say what he thought.

"Too much. And you'll be down worse. Which'll mean trouble all round."

CRAMER'S sneer tightened; Jim tried to show him the folly of his way. In desperation and anger, Jim became brutally plain.

"You're a bigger damfool, Bob, than I thought you to be. And I'm not believing that fifty-dollar yarn. By what I've heard, Smoky's driven the hooks into you plenty deep and a showdown's looming up. And

if the showdown doesn't mean anything to you, try to think what it'll mean to your people. Try to get your mother's slant on this."

"My mother's slant! What has my mother to do with it?"

Jim shrugged. "Nothing—yet."

For a moment Bob Cramer stared challengingly at Jim. Then, "What's all the fuss about?" he hotly demanded. "Can't a feller play poker if he wants to?"

Jim nodded. "He may play all he likes —on his own cash."

There was a fractional pause, then Bob Cramer jumped up. Face flushed and eyes dangerously bright, he glared down at Jim Marsh.

"So that's it, eh?" he said in a dry, tight voice. "I'm a crook, am I? A crook? Come on; say it all!" And when Jim merely shrugged, he strode out into the aisle. "Thanks for the good advice —and the coffee coming up. Hand 'em to somebody else!"

With the slam of the restaurant door, the conviction came to Jim Marsh that he had been a fool. His face burned and an uncomfortable feeling settled around his stomach. Apparently Bob Cramer was innocent of the subtle charge he had made. He had been playing, yes; gambling; but he wasn't necessarily a crook.

In chastened mood, Jim drank his coffee. He remembered the youngster's flushed cheeks and his blazing eyes. Yeah; he told himself, he'd been a bit too hasty with him. And too rough. It was all right to carry out Mary Cramer's wishes and keep an eye on young Bob, but to bawl him out and accuse him of being a thief was something different.

"At least," admitted Jim Marsh; "I can apologize to him. At least, yeah—about the least I can do."

He went out, looking for Bob Cramer but failed to find him; and after spending a useless hour, he returned to the detachment. He busied himself in preparing a report on an investigation he had conducted into a drowning-case the day previously, but failed to banish entirely Bob Cramer from his mind.

"No go!" he said at last. "I've got to find the kid and square myself tonight."

It was already dark, and Jim made a straight course for the bank. A light was burning within, and through the window he saw Bob Cramer sitting on a stool at a desk. For a moment he stood and watched him.

The youngster seemed worried. Chin in hand he sat, the fingers of the other hand beating a devil's tattoo on the desktop. He stared at the wall, got up; took a few jerky steps and sat down again. Now his head was in both his hands and he kept the position for some moments. Then abruptly he crossed to the typewriter, slipped in a sheet of paper and went to work.

Jim watched in grim silence. The typing did not take long. Cramer yanked the sheet from the machine, slipped it into an envelope and placed the finished product on the manager's desk.

At first, Jim had wondered what Bob Cramer could have found to write about. He speculated if this letter-writing had any bearing on his nervous manner. But this sealing the letter and placing it on the manager's desk had an air of finality about it that Jim didn't like. And when a moment later the youngster stepped into the teller's cage, picked something up and slipped it into his pocket, Jim swung to the door.

He tried to open it. It was locked. He hammered on it and was relieved when he heard Cramer's footsteps approaching. A moment later, with the door opened, he made a swift grab for Bob Cramer's right hand.

Cramer struggled, demanding to know the big idea. In silence Jim searched him, drew out a .38 revolver and shoved it into his own pocket. Then he crossed to the manager's desk and picked up the letter.

"O.K., Bob," he said. "Let's get up the hill."

Instantly a change swept over Bob Cramer's face. He paled, swallowed with difficulty.

"The hill?" he managed to say. "The detachment? You mean—you don't mean that—?" There was a note of sudden terror in his voice.

"I don't mean a thing," Jim told him shortly. "Not yet, at any rate."

In the detachment Jim closed the door and lit the lamp. He drew up a chair for Bob Cramer on one side of his desk and took another facing him. He leaned back; nodded.

"All right, Bob. And begin at the beginning."

THERE was a look in the younger man's eyes that Jim had seen in the eyes of other men. There was fear, there was the wild searching for a way of escape, but there was also a certain stubbornness. Jim gave him a moment or two to adjust himself, then drew out the letter and revolver and laid them on the table.

"Will you tell me, Bob—or do I have to find out for myself?"

Suddenly, young Cramer cracked. His head went down on his arms and his shoulders heaved. To Jim, this was no new sight, although it was one that al-

ways moved him. But in Bob Cramer's case it was different. This was Mary's boy—the boy who might have been Jim's own son.

Jim stood up, came around and shook the heaving shoulders with rough kindness.

"Take it easy, Bob. When you get ready we'll see what we can do."

In a moment or two, young Cramer mastered his feelings. He looked up, face wet but fiercely harsh.

"Give me that gun!" he demanded. "This would have been settled if you hadn't butted in!"

"Which wouldn't have settled anything," Jim observed. "And now, go ahead with your story."

Bit by bit, Jim drew it out. It was pitiful, but old as the hills. There was the poker-game with Smoky Jeffrys and his henchmen; a series of wins, and the turning of the tide.

"I figured I could beat 'em," admitted young Cramer. "Figured I could make a comeback. But I needed the dough to string along on."

"So you lifted it from the bank."

Cramer's head went up. "I lifted nothing. I only borrowed it. D'you think I'm a crook?"

It was the same question he had asked Jim a few hours before. The contemplation of it was pitiful. Apparently from Cramer's viewpoint there was a difference in stealing money and borrowing it to gamble on. But Jim made no comment.

"And so—?" he asked.

"Finally they got into me so heavily I could never get square." He hesitated. "I—I lied to you tonight. I'm down eight hundred bucks."

"Hmmm." Jim drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Eight hundred bucks. And for eight hundred bucks you were prepared to blow out your brains. That's what I suppose you were doing with the gun?"

Jim Marsh was suddenly angry. The kid was a crazy fool. Crazy to think he could beat Smoky Jeffrys at his own game. Crazy to "borrow" the money

from the bank. Crazier still to think that a bullet would settle anything. He turned an exasperated glance on him.

"You're about nineteen, aren't you, Bob?"

"Twenty next month."

"And in twenty years you've scraped together blamed little intelligence. Eight hundred dollars is considerable dough, but it isn't worth wrecking your life and the lives of your people for. A man may go haywire—"

But Bob Cramer broke him off. "It wasn't only the money. It was Smoky Jeffrys." His voice became murderously harsh. "Smoky propositioned me tonight. Soon after I left you. He gave me the option of two things—I could either play ball his way, or he'd turn me in to the boss."

Jim's eyes suddenly narrowed. He leaned forward in his chair.

"And—what was Smoky's way?"

"A chance to play the crook! He'd hold up the bank while I was alone in it; and the money I'm short would never be noticed in the wad he'd grab."

For a moment or two Jim said nothing; but his mind was working fast.

"Did Smoky, by any chance, suggest when this hold-up should take place?"

"Certainly. Tomorrow. While Mr. Thompson is still sick in bed."

There was another pause, while Jim studied Bob Cramer intently.

"Instead of playing ball with Smoky Jeffrys, Bob, will you play ball with me? It'll mean taking a chance; it'll mean showing the guts I think you have; and I wonder if you'll do it?"

"Playing ball with you?" Bob Cramer frowned. "I don't know what you're suggesting, but I'll do it anyway." His eyes clouded again. "But that won't square me with the bank."

"No," agreed Jim, "it won't. And that's the trouble, Bob. Life's sort of severe with us. We have to pay for our mistakes. I've paid for mine; and you must pay for yours. But in the meantime, suppose a chap came along and covered your loss by a loan to you, I wonder would this chap have your assurance that you'd quit playing the fool?"

"Would he?" exclaimed Bob Cramer. "He'd get it without asking!"

"Tell you why," went on Jim. "I might be able to take care of your shortage until such time as you're able to square it off. It'll mean drawing on the Royal Bank in Edmonton through your office, but it'll cover the deficiency."

"What?" Bob Cramer broke in. A flush of deep color spread over his face. "Knowing what I've done, you're game to take a chance on me?"

"I've taken bigger chances," Jim told him quietly. "And I don't think this will be much of a gamble. I prefer to call it an investment—an investment in human values."

Bob Cramer blinked; his lip began to tremble. "I don't know what to say, Sergeant—"

"Then suppose we say nothing," suggested Jim with rough kindness. "Suppose we talk about Smoky Jeffrys. Smoky," he said, and his voice went suddenly hard, "is a yellow crook who should have been hung long ago. He's not the type who goes into crime for the excitement of the thing; he's a cheap rat who plays a sure bet. Smoky's line is rolling a drunk, peddling dope, and trafficking in women. His game with you is typical of him—the sure-bet again. But this time he's gone his limit. You say you'll play ball with me. All right; you will. And it'll give you the chance to show the guts I think you have."

IT WAS dark in Nelson Landing, dark but star-studded at two in the morning. Down in the bank Bob Cramer poured over a set of books. He was pale, and under apparent strain; but when a tap came on the door he turned and opened it.

The light from within fell on the faces of Smoky Jeffrys and his two companions. Smoky also had a revolver, which he shoved against Bob Cramer's stomach.

"Fair enough, kid. Back up, and act natural."

In the deeper shadows beyond the doorway stood Jim Marsh. He saw Bob Cramer carry out Smoky's command by retreating with his hands above his head. He saw him, too, herded by Smoky's gun, make around the counter and stand there while Smoky's sidekicks crossed to the safe against the wall. One of these carried a gunny-sack.

A minute went by; two. Bob Cramer's hands began to come down. Smoky chuckled in amusement.

"Hold her, kid! We want to do the thing up right!"

The other two men turned, their gunny-sack bulging. Smoky spoke.

"O.K., boys. Drift!"

The man with the sack hesitated. "But we're tyin' him up, ain't we? Wasn't that the idea?"

Smoky chuckled again. A crafty note crept into his voice. "Yeah? And ad-

vertise the fact it was an outside job? That's what you think! The way she is, she looks better. Now it's the kid's picnic, see? He comes down here at two in the mornin', gets away with the mazuma, and tries to run a bluff he was held up!" Smoky's chuckle thickened. "Let him tell that to the bulls!"

Bob Cramer's hands dropped. His eyes blazed.

"Why, you dirty doublecrosser!" he spat at Smoky. "I might have known that a rat like you—"

"Skip it!" Smoky's voice was a guttural snarl. "You ain't in no shape to talk! If I—"

Then Smoky turned at a creak of a board to see Jim Marsh covering him with his .45.

It was Smoky's turn to stiffen. The gun in his hand wavered.

"Drop it!" was Jim Marsh's curt order. "And you with the sack—drop that, too!"

Still covering them, he came around the counter, spoke to Cramer without taking his eyes from the others.

"Nice going, Bob. You've got your own gun; cover 'em till I get 'em handcuffed." He holstered the .45 and pulled the handcuffs from his pocket. "You!" he told Smoky. "I need your wrist."

Smoky looked about him wildly. His eyes beseeched his mates for assistance. But they stood by, hands up in submission. With one of the bracelets around Smoky's right wrist, Jim turned to the hair-trigger Finn.

"Now you!"

The man hesitated, extended his hand. Jim Marsh had the steel about it when it flashed up and exploded against his jaw.

It was a terrific blow. He staggered, went down. He heard the blast of a gun; the sound of running feet. Dazed, he called to Bob Cramer.

"Let 'em have it, Bob! *Get 'em!*"

He managed to scramble up, only to find his ally clinging to the counter. Blood was running from a corner of Cramer's mouth. Despite the swiftness of the past few seconds, Jim felt sudden apprehension.

"What is it, Bob? They get you?"

The youngster shook his head, spat a mouthful of blood.

"Smoky—" he managed to say. "Slugged me as I fired."

Jim grabbed him. "Here; hold on to me!"

"I'm O.K.!" The words were bitten-off, suddenly savage. Bob Cramer wiped a smear of the blood from his face. "I'll get 'em!"

Twenty seconds in all had elapsed by the time Jim Marsh made through the door. From the direction of the river-front came the sound of running feet. Without a word he started in pursuit, Bob Cramer staggering at his heels.

HIS head was ringing and his jaw ached, but he forgot his troubles in the anger that gripped him. He had been outwitted, outguessed, and made a fool of by three cheap crooks. Worst of all, it had happened in the presence of young Bob Cramer. The thought spurred him to greater action; and if anything more were needed it came from Cramer himself panting at his heels.

"They got the money—grabbed it as they went!"

Jim's teeth set. His gun was out, waiting for a glimpse of the three before him.

Along the street went the chase, over the river-bank, down to where men were heard piling into a canoe. Jim, more keen than cautious, emptied his gun in their general direction. A scatter of shots came back. And an outboard motor broke into life.

Jim turned, stumped for the moment. Figures appeared from town. Men demanded explanations which Jim ignored.

"Here, Bob!" He ran the dozen yards to where his own nineteen-foot canoe and twelve-horse engine lay ready. He heaved, tugged, got the canoe into the water, hefted a gas-can, ordered Bob Cramer aboard and piled in himself.

"Swing the nose — straight downstream!"

As the canoe came round he clawed for the starting-rope. Cranking, cursing, sweat streaming down his face, he managed to get a dozen sulky kicks from the cold engine. More cranking, more blind setting of the carburetor, and he won out.

But wiping the sweat from his face as the canoe sped on, he was none too sanguine of the future. Smoky and his pals had gained a five-minute start and he didn't know where they were going. Added to which, he had no shells for his .45, nor were he and Bob Cramer prepared for what might prove to be a lengthy chase. Bob, as a matter of fact, was dressed as he was in the bank—hatless, coatless and with his sleeves rolled up. Just now a cool west wind blew up-river, and while it was acceptable at the moment, it would soon be too raw for comfort. Five minutes later the engine ran out of gas.

In grim silence Jim reached for the fuel-can. As the echoes of his own motor died away he heard the sound of the one on the canoe ahead. It was plainer than it had been at the start, and his spirits suddenly rose. Whatever Smoky had pinned his chances of escape to, it certainly wasn't a twelve-horse engine.

THE chase held steadily for five miles. Jim judged the time to be nearing three in the morning, for the sky was becoming streaked with gray. In another half-hour it would be light enough to distinguish objects. But long before the half-hour had elapsed he shut off his motor in an endeavor to gain some inkling of just how far ahead were Smoky and his mates.

It came clear, strong, the hum of the motor on the fleeing canoe. Jim knew it could not be more than a few hundred yards distant. In eagerness he spun the twelve-horse into life again.

Just how this thing would finish, Jim could only guess. Doubtless the bandits would still be armed; but he hoped by his superior speed to force them out of the race and ashore. There, in the bush, he might have a better chance with them.

At least, their escape by the river would be definitely cut off.

Another half-mile went by with Jim staring intently into the night. Suddenly, he thought he saw something—a shadow, darker than the other shadows around him. Then a tongue of flame licked out. A breeze fanned his ear.

He yelled a warning to Bob Cramer. A crash was coming up. He ducked against it—

The canoe hit, rocked crazily, bounced off. There were yells, more bursts of flame. Jim swung in a circle, headed upstream and towards shore where he knew the other canoe to be going. He cut the motor as gravel grated beneath the keel, and in the ensuing silence heard the crashing of bushes.

Bob Cramer was the first one out. He held the bow while Jim scrambled ashore.

"Hark at 'em!" Reckless, healthy excitement was in his tone. "Sounds like a herd of elephants!"

Jim grunted. This was no laughing matter. He tore up the bank, hot in pursuit.

But fifty yards deep in the underbrush he pulled up abruptly. An uncanny silence had fallen. He stood listening, hearing nothing but the beating of his own heart and the excited breathing of Bob Cramer.

"Where'd they go?" asked Cramer.

"Sh-h-h-!" was all Jim said.

Minutes went by. An owl hooted, and off to one side a squirrel broke into angry chattering. Jim's fingers closed tightly about the younger man's shoulder. This was tricky work; something that called for coolness. At least one of the gang was armed and ready to shoot on sight. He might be even working his way back; within shooting distance already.

"Listen!" Bob Cramer's voice was a low whisper. "Hear that—over there?"

Jim turned. All he heard was the rush of the blood in his ear-drums.

"Over there!" insisted Bob Cramer. "Crackling bushes!"

The youngster, decided Jim, either had sharp ears or a keen imagination. But to reassure himself, Jim commenced a crawling reconnoiter.

He made a dozen yards, paused to listen—and something loomed huge above him. There was a grunt of surprise, and for the second time that night a bullet screamed by Jim Marsh's head as he rose to the attack.

He grabbed his man, pinning his arms to his sides. He lifted him, swung, and they both went down. Teeth closed on his shoulder, a knee drove into his stomach. Other men rushed in.

Only the gloom of the near-dawn saved Jim Marsh. Too dark to distinguish friend from foe, these other two could only pry and tug in an effort to separate Jim and his man. And Jim fought against it. He clung the tighter, butted with his head and tried to get hold of the gun.

The gun suddenly blazed. The bullet missed Jim, but there was an answering scream. The bushes crashed again as a man went down. Jim heard a yell and knew it to be Bob Cramer's.

"Hang and rattle, Sarge! Right in there with you!"

Jim tried to shout a warning, but fingers clamped on his windpipe. After that it was all a haze. There were blows, kicks, a crawling to the feet and a falling down again. Bob Cramer was now in the fight, for Jim heard his exultant yell. Then a couple more shots, a grabbing of a gun from a man's hand and a smash with it on another man's head—then peace of a sort came about.

AFTER that, it was a matter of taking inventory. The man Jim had struck sustained a fractured skull. Another man—and it happened to be the hair-trigger Finn — was knocked out. Smoky Jeffrys lay unmoving, the gray of

the dawn reflected in the grayness of his features.

"Smoky was out of luck," was Jim Marsh's grim comment. "He stopped something intended for me."

"And I stopped something else!" Bob Cramer laughed headily. "Still I got in one good wallop that—that—" And without completing the sentence he folded up and went to the ground.

Jim Marsh was on his knees beside him. He slipped a hand around his shoulder, and withdrew it hastily. It was damp, sticky with blood.

There might have been ten gunmen on the scene at that moment and Jim Marsh would have ignored them all. He rolled Cramer over, ripped open his shirt, struck a match. Through the muscles of the neck just above the collarbone was a clean-drilled hole. Jim gave an exclamation of prayerful relief.

"You didn't stop that one, youngster; and it's just as well you didn't!"

There was little to be done beyond binding the wound with strips torn from Cramer's shirt. Jim did this; and after removing the handcuff that still adorned Smoky's wrist and transferring it to the wrists of the other two men, he carried Cramer down to the shore.

They were well on their way upstream again before Cramer opened his eyes. He sat up, winced; glanced at the two manacled bandits forward of the canoe then turned to Jim Marsh in the stern.

"Where's Smoky?" he asked.

Jim indicated something under a tarp amidships, and kicked at a sack at his feet.

"And here's the dough!"

It was hard to talk above the roar of the engine, and later no opportunity came; for they were met and escorted in by three other canoes that had, belatedly, taken up the chase. But if Jim did not speak he thought a lot.

What was it he had told the kid that night in the detachment—something about paying for the mistakes one made? Well; it was true. Bob had paid for his, or would when he squared away that eight hundred bucks. And Bob was lucky to get off so lightly. Everybody did not have that luck. Jim Marsh, for one. The flush of early morning sat on Bob Cramer's face as, in profile, he watched the banks of the river slipping past. At that moment his resemblance to Mary Cramer was striking. It conjured up to Jim those memories he had tried so long to forget. Now, he could never forget them; at least, not so long as young Bob was around. And what he had in mind for young Bob meant the kid would be around all the time.

It wasn't going to be easy for Jim; it was going to be blamed hard. But in the doing of it he would be able to make some amends to Mary Cramer through Mary Cramer's son.

That morning, in the detachment, he came down to facts.

"I've changed my opinion about you, Bob. You've got to get out of the bank."

Bob Cramer, sitting in a chair with his shoulder taped up, nodded dully.

"I'll get out, all right—when those mugs tell their story."

"*Their* story!" hooted Jim. "That you were in on the deal? The judge'll believe that when I explain you were working with me! But I'm talking about you and your bank-clerk's job. How," he asked abruptly, "would you like to join the Mounted Police?"

Bob Cramer frowned again, but this time in puzzlement.

"Would I like to? But, heck, I'm not old enough."

"You're not," agreed Jim. "By one whole year. But on the other hand, I've got to hire me a Special Constable—a sidekick, y'know, to take the trail with me. You're a bit green, but you can learn. And for the rest of it—well, you've got what the Force is looking for. And that's guts!"

Bob Cramer's breath was coming quickly. "Gosh; I don't know—"

"You'll see the North, as you've always wanted to do; you'll rough it and wonder why the devil you took such a job; but you'll stick. And at the end of a year you'll go down to Regina and enlist with a season's experience behind you."

"If I could only do that!" Bob Cramer's eyes were shining.

"But meanwhile," explained Jim, "you are on the sick-list, and will be for a couple of weeks. So the best thing to do is to take a trip down home, have a talk with your dad, and get his permission to take the job I'm talking about."

But Bob Cramer was frowning in sudden perplexity.

"My dad, you said? Why, dad's been dead five years. Did I never tell you?"

Jim Marsh stiffened. His heart began to thump.

"What?" he managed to say. "Your dad is *dead—?*"

"Sure. He was killed in a car accident south of High River. That's why I had to cut short my schooling and go to work. I wanted to be a mining-engineer, but dad, well—it wasn't his fault, but he left us in a tough spot."

Jim Marsh did not hear what else Bob Cramer said. Jim's world was spinning; the full significance of the kid's words were pounding at his brain. Could he, he asked himself, roll back the years, go to Mary Cramer and tell her he had tried to do something with his life after all?

At last he managed to speak. He did it hesitatingly, almost fearfully.

"How'd it be, Bob— I mean, supposing when you go south I string along? I haven't seen your mother since Hector was a pup; and, well, old friends, y'know——"

Bob Cramer let out a whoop. "You'll do that—come back with me? I told you that she was always talking to me about you!" He paused, looked at Jim again to see if he really meant what he had suggested. "Tell you, Sarge—if you're game to go, we'll start for home in the morning!"

BY H. BEDFORD-JONES

Government Documents Say She Disappeared with All Hands; But Did She?

THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF THE U. S. S. "GRAMPUS"

FIVE ships of the United States Navy—vanished without a trace!

"Sounds like a pipe dream," said Belt, the Canadian correspondent. "You can't make me swallow that yarn."

"It's entirely true." Fellows, who had some sort of a job in the Bureau of Navigation, nodded solemnly at us. He was a solemn sort of chap; took himself seriously, if you know the kind.

We were sitting in a corner of the Press Club in Washington. Señor Blanco, who was an attaché of the Argentine Legation, had been intensely interested in our discussion of missing ships. Now he leaned forward and spoke. His English was flawless; he himself, with his crisp yellow hair and ruddy features, usually passed for an American.

'Do you happen to remember what ships disappeared, Mr. Fellows? Of

course, there was the *Cyclops*, which vanished in 1918 with over three hundred men; submarined, I think?"

"No," said Fellows. "The Department has definitely dismissed that possibility. Her fate's a mystery, that's all. Same with the *Conestoga*, which sailed from San Francisco in 1921 and was never heard from again. The other three go back into earlier history. In 1839 the *Sea Gull*, a navy schooner and pilot boat, disappeared; she supposedly foundered in a gale off Cape Horn, but she's another mystery. Then, in 1841, the *Peacock* up and vanished, in the Columbia River; cause unknown to this day."

Fellows paused, frowning, and pulled at his cigar.

"That makes four," said Belt. "Sorry I spoke so hastily. I thought you meant that five ships had vanished all at once. What was the fifth?"

"Dash it all! Slipped my memory," exclaimed Fellows, obviously irritated by his failure to recall the matter. "I'm positive there were five—"

"Perhaps she was the *Grampus?*" put in Señor Blanco quietly. Fellows relaxed and his face cleared.

"Of course! I have it now. The *Grampus*. That was in 1843. She put in at Charleston the middle of March; there's a letter in the files, mailed there, saying she would reach Norfolk between the 8th and 15th of April. She'd been on a cruise along the coast. Well, she never got to Norfolk, that's all. She simply disappeared."

"No, she never got to Norfolk," observed Señor Blanco musingly. "It was a horrible affair; something diabolic, inhuman, about that sort of cold-blooded killing. Lends a ghastly, creepy tinge to the whole thing. Also, your facts are slightly wrong."

His quiet words fell upon startled silence. Fellows jerked around and stared at him for an instant, then broke out sharply.

"Good lord! Do you know anything about the mystery of the *Grampus?*"

"Yes," said Señor Blanco. He produced a fresh cigar and bit at it with an air of unconcern, as though nothing mattered.

"Well, look here! The Department ought to know about it," exclaimed Fellows in his most departmental manner. "We'd like to clear up such a matter, by all means."

The Argentine attaché gave him a slow, sleepy smile.

"I don't mind telling you about it," he observed, in a tone that should have warned our solemn bureaucrat. "The ship—she was a ten-gun schooner—did not put in at Charleston at all; she lay off the bar four days, at which time the letter you mention was mailed. She had eleven officers aboard, giving them a practice cruise; she was bound on a run down the coast to Cuba and back. She left Charleston on March 15th, with Midshipman Isaac You acting master. Note the name well; it's important. The real commander at the time was Lieutenant Downes. The wardroom steward was Jack White. One of the gunners forward was a swarthy, powerful man with a skin like weathered oak; Casanave was his name, and he hailed from Louisiana. There you have the makings of as dark and damnable a piece of villainy as ever happened in this world."

WHY so? There was nothing in his words to give any clue. Blanco paused to light his cigar, very carefully getting no fire in it from the match; a true connoisseur. Presently he smiled, seeing our attention, and went on.

"White was new in the service; he was a rather young fellow, very straight and tall, a Mississippi river man—which means that when it came to savage fighting he had all the tricks of the western frontier. Even though his folly might have caused what happened, you must not figure him as a fool. He even walked like

an Indian or frontiersman, with straight feet, not toeing out—"

A queer thing, aboard ship. The figure of young White took on life before us; there he was, working about the wardroom and the officers' cabins with his silent, swift tread and his wide smiling mouth, his blue laughing eyes and freckled nose and cheeks, and a shock of closely trimmed hair that grew in curls. They called him Curly on account of it, but the men forward had learned not to pass any crude jokes on the subject. The first day out of Norfolk he had sent two of them to the sick bay. He could fight, that man.

He was making up the commander's cabin when he glimpsed the gold.

This was after Charleston was under the horizon. Lieutenant Downes had him move out a heavy strong box and help open it. Curly glimpsed little sacks of coin under the lid, and some loose gold. Why it was there, naturally, was none of his business; whether pay money for the troops in Florida, or what, he never knew. But he knew that the key was in the pocket of Downes.

Up forward, that night, he casually mentioned the gold aboard. It occasioned no little comment among the men. The schooner was standing over with a spanking wind pushing her along, and someone said she might raise the Cuban coast before heading back. Casanave sat there with a fierce, wild light in his dark eyes. He was bared to the waist, and his brown torso was dark with tattooing. He was older than he looked.

"Standing for Cuba," he sneered in his softly slurred English. "With Isaac You as her acting master, and me for gunner —ho. And gold under the hatches. D'ye know who taught me to lay a gun?"

Most of the men feared Casanave, because they did not understand his wild dark ways, and his French blood; also, it was said that in fight he was a devil unleashed. So no one took him up until White, laughing a little, broke the silence.

"Well, Casanave, and who taught you gunnery?"

"The man who learned artillery in school with Napoleon, and who became Lafitte's captain, and who laid the American guns at the battle of New Orleans! Dominic You, and no other."

No one there had ever heard of Dominic You, except White.

"I've seen his grave in New Orleans," said he. "If he taught you, then you learned damn young."

"So I did." Casanave showed white, strong teeth in a snarl. "My own father was shot by you Yankees when Lafitte's fleet was busted up at Galveston—"

A GROWL went up. "Gunner or not, you're in the service," said somebody, "and if you don't like the flag, you'd better get out from under it!"

Casanave snarled again. "Me, I am an American, but no Yankee!" said he. "And Isaac You, Passed Midshipman, is the living image of his father, Captain Dominic."

White's laugh broke upon the silence.

"He's no son of that damned pirate! Something wrong with your head, Casanave. You hate everybody aboard here. That's not the first time you've made some crack about Yankees, either, and I'm tired of it. You may be the best gunner in the Navy, as they say you are, but you're a damned poor gunner's mate. You haven't got a friend aboard this or any other ship. You may as well hear the truth for once, and get to know yourself. And if you pull that knife, I'll murder you!"

The last words crackled. Casanave had slipped a hand to the knife at his thigh; his black, vivid eyes fairly blazed hatred. He gathered his muscles, as though about to spring. For an instant he poised—then relaxed, his hand fell, his eyes dropped. Only his trace of accent, when he made reply, showed the intensity of his emotion; usually his English was clouded at such times.

"I am not fight; I lose good time, lib-

erty. Later, ashore, maybe I take you apart."

He looked up again, with this, and at sight of his face nobody ventured any jokes. If ever death lived in a face, it was here—gray, drawn, convulsed. Then he rose and went his way.

It was the following afternoon when the trouble began; but no one realized it for what it was. The forces of nature merely provided an excuse by which man might act in security. Sometimes White was tempted to think of it as collusion between man and the malefic spirit in nature.

Three bells had just struck; five-thirty. The sun was a dim red ball in a mist-gray sky, with not the faintest breath of wind. The four lieutenants were playing cards in the wardroom, under the wide-open transom. Midshipm You, a trim, dark, pinched-face young fellow with a long jaw, had just come up to relieve another midshipman who had the deck.

White was at the galley door, talking with the cook, when he was suddenly aware that the red ball of the sun had vanished. He gaped up at the sky, startled. A shout reached him from the quarter-deck. Another came from the watch forward. Abruptly the bosun's whistle began to pipe its shrill, jiggling note—then it was drowned out in a shriek that swept the sky.

Carelessness? Of course. In this split instant, White knew someone had neglected to keep an eye on the glass; that it should not have dropped in warning, was impossible. Just time for the one sharp, frightful thought, before the shriek came swooping down, caught the schooner full unprepared, whirled her around and laid her over with a crackle and splintering of spars. It was exactly as though some enormous hand had hit her, spun her, smashed her, and then held her motionless.

ANOTHER split instant, as she lay. Shouts, shrieks, crash upon crash below, and White hanging on for dear life. Then a hissing noise drowned everything; a wall of spray and water rose up in the sky and curled over her, and fell down her almost perpendicular deck. It was a Niagara torrent, sweeping everything before it.

White, luckily, was jammed in the shrouds, pressed against them by the tons of water; indeed, the life was very nearly pressed out of him. In his brain lingered a horrific vision of the deck as that water-mountain curled over and swept it. A gun-carriage tearing loose with a rush; the cabin transom shattering out; Conway, the surgeon, with blood spurting from his face where something had hit him; a group of seamen, plunging headlong down the deck as the schooner heeled; hurled from the quarter deck, the Midshipman Beadel actually sprawling out in mid-air. And then, all in a flash, the blanketing smother of spray and water, and the frightful pressure that held him helpless yet safe.

The pressure lifted. Half strangled, coughing, gasping, White was conscious of a horrible silence. His vision cleared. There came a terrific crash, a shiver of the schooner—a whole strip of the larboard bulwarks was torn out as a gun careened down the sloping deck. A second gun, this. To White's horrified glimpse, there was nothing but gashed ruin left of the deck—half the guns gone, boats gone, galley and transom and everything else gone. Topmasts gone, everything carried clean away. Men gone, only two or three clinging shapes in sight. Upon that dread minute of silence, faint shrieking voices came from somewhere. They were echoed from what had been the wardroom—the officers were trapped there by tons of water. Then the silence ended. A whistle, a scream, and the wind hit.

The schooner shivered, lay over a little further, then swung and lurched to a more even keel. And all the time, which was no more than a moment or two, the

daylight was dying out and the sky was blackening.

The wind was flattening—so much so that there was no great sea, after that one tremendous tidal-wave impact. Whether an actual tidal-wave, or a mere wall of water scooped up by suction of the blast, White never knew or cared; anyhow, it was a fact. And it had all but finished the *Grampus* at one crack.

Finding that she was swimming, that her masts were intact, White looked aft. The wheel was gone, but Midshipman You was there, hanging to the after-shrouds. Three figures forward. Two more were crawling from the hood of the forecastle. White, with a ghastly panic in his heart, clawed his way aft to the wreckage of the transom. He looked down, but darkness was already upon them; he could see nothing. He called Lieutenant Downes, and had no answer.

He started for the companionway, and halted as one of the men came from forward, yelling. White listened. The man was in mad blind terror.

"Foc's'le full o' water! All drowned like rats—"

That was nonsense, thought White, and slid down the ladder.

Water was streaming from everything, here. His voice roused one answer—Thatcher, the purser, who joined him. They pulled young Minchell out of his cabin, found his neck broken, and dropped him. Lewis, the other midshipman, showed up with an arm broken and useless, then dragged himself on deck to summon more help in order to break into the wardroom. Water still filled it like a slowly ebbing tub.

Gunner Casanave came down to help. Five men left forward besides himself, he said, the wheel carried away, the rudder probably smashed. But the schooner was sound.

They broke in. All four lieutenants were there, drowned and dead with playing cards swishing around them. Midshipman You came down, looked at the four bodies under the fitful lantern White had lit, and nodded.

"Death's warm enough, anyhow; lucky it's not December," he said. "Casanave, lay up and lend a hand—you too, White. We've got to get a rag of canvas on her, and rig some kind of stopper for that transom. The carpenter's still with us."

"Aye, sir," and they went up into the darkness and white spray. The *Grampus* shuttered and staggered with every wave that hit her and burst across her decks, to flood more water down below. Only one boat, the little dinghy, still remained to the schooner.

Somehow, they did it. Casanave and the carpenter, both powerful men, stoppered the smashed transom, and it soon proved she was making no more water. The guns were cut away and sent over, to lighten her. The bowsprit was gone with the top-hamper, but You contrived to get a bit of sail on her, and when the emergency tiller was shipped, the rudder was found to be working still, though apparently much damaged. And in the forecastle was death, as in the wardroom, for the hood had been swept clear away and water had cascaded in to trap every man there. This gap had to be stoppered also; the seas were rising, and bursting across the decks.

These things done, they could only settle down to ride out the dark hours.

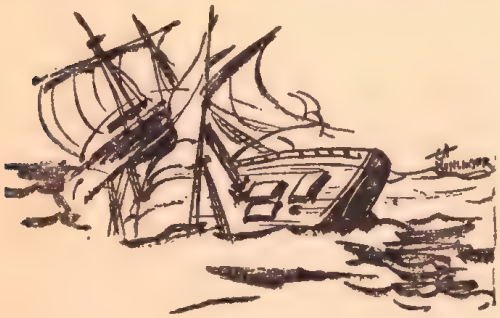
IT WAS a night of physical and mental suffering. White, being a newly enlisted man on his first cruise, endured better than the others, who had seen their friends and old shipmates wiped out in a moment. He stuck with You, admiring him, aiding him; the young fellow had iron in him. So had Lewis, who endured the pain of his broken arm without a whimper.

During that night of hell, death still clung with the *Grampus*. Toward dawn the sky blew clear, the stars suddenly ap-

peared. Yet, when daylight brightened in the east and You took in hand the labor of reconstruction and appraisal, while the schooner rode huge seas, it was learned that the purser had vanished during the night. Neither was the carpenter aboard to greet the sun. How and why? Not a soul could say. Perhaps washed over in the dark hours.

When You counted heads, he was simply appalled, and small wonder. Out of all that ship's company remained only five enlisted men, the steward and two officers. As though to intensify the disaster by contrast, the day broke gloriously calm, with only the fast-running seas and the frightful wreckage to indicate what had passed. Eight men all told—it was incredible! The dead had to be buried, the pumps manned, the ship worked; all by eight men. Rather, by seven. Lewis, with his arm broken, could do no work.

Even so, discipline was discipline. You was too young an officer to know when it should be relaxed, when not; he held the men rigidly down, though he himself pitched in with them. White saw him carefully take the keys, papers and personal belongings from the body of Lieutenant Downes. This was all White knew;



he was set to work breaking out cabin stores for all hands, acting as cook and steward in one, and getting the horrible mess down below into some semblance of order. Once the bodies were passed up, he saw no more of them.

Somehow they staggered through that day, divided into watches under the two young officers. The schooner was headed up for somewhere—Cuba, somebody said: the tip of Florida, went another report. Only the two officers knew. Nobody else cared. They had to clear the hold of water, and any spare interval was given to manning the pumps, until they dropped like exhausted dogs.

When the high stars came out, White had put in a spell at the pumps and dropped, lying crumpled in the scuppers, asleep before he had time to stretch out. Somebody else had relieved him. Out of this exhausted slumber he wakened, later, when a man stumbled over him. Watches were being changed. The ship's bell, like everything else, had gone; but watches were changed just the same. White lay where he was—weary, sore, stiff. He heard a man speak, while the unending pump-handles squeaked and clanked.

"Lay off that talk or I'll report you. Who in hell let you into the Navy, anyhow?"

A soft, low laugh startled White. It was the laugh of Casanave.

"It's your chance," he said. "I'm not the only one in it, Ricks!"

"You're a liar by the clock," snapped Ricks. "You're the only one crazy enough to talk about mutiny and gold—arrh! You make me sick, you big stiff. Get to work."

Casanave laughed again. White wondered at it all, then slept once more. He was not at all certain he had heard aright; it meant nothing at the time, except that Casanave must have been telling some bawdy yarn about pirates.

With daylight, Midshipman You came on deck to relieve Lewis. The schooner, with her lower canvas set, was easing handily along under light airs from the eastward. Casanave and another man, a seaman named Gentry, were up in the bows on watch. The tiller was made fast with a line, holding the schooner approximately on her course, but the helmsman was gone. By the quarterdeck rail was the cap of Lewis; but Lewis, broken arm and all, was gone.

It was incredible. You summoned all hands—the two men in his watch, White, Gentry and Casanave. When a search had proved that the missing men simply were not aboard, You gathered his five companions.

"I don't know what to make of this; do you? Who has any suggestions?"

Casanave saluted. His brown features were seamed, rugged, grave.

"Something wrong, sir. The carpenter and the purser went the same way."

A flicker of fear passed from man to man; White could feel it. He could see it reflected for an instant in the eyes of the young officer. Then You grunted.

"Nonsense! You and Gentry were on watch. Ricks had the tiller, Mr. Lewis was close by him. What did you hear or see that was unusual?"

"Not a thing, sir," spoke up Gentry. "Casanave thought he heard Mr. Lewis call him, once, and went aft. This was about four bells."

"Two o'clock, eh?" You's eyes went to Casanave. "Was everything all right then?"

"Yes, sir," said Casanave. "Mr. Lewis hadn't called me, he said. He was by the after rail. He told me to take the tiller while he sent Ricks below on an errand. Five minutes later, I went for'ard again."

"What was the errand?" asked You.

The bronzed gunner hesitated. "Well, sir, Mr. Lewis thought he had heard queer noises coming from the wardroom, and he didn't like it. He thought he had heard Lieutenant Downes calling him."

Even White, who had small patience with the supernatural, blanched at these words.

"Why didn't you report this in the first place?" snapped You.

"Well, sir, it sounded silly. And me, I was afraid," said the strapping gunner.

No one smiled, but You rapped out an oath. "I don't believe a damned word of it! White, stir up something to eat. Gentry, sound the well; I think we can leave the pumps alone, but we'd better make sure. We'll be in port tomorrow if this breeze holds, anyhow."

WHITE went about his work, and something was stirring in him. He remembered the scrap of talk at the pumps, the previous night, between Ricks and Casanave. He could not swallow this ghostly voice of the dead Downes; he just could not credit the fear Casanave displayed. The whole thing somehow rang false to him. Casanave was not that sort of a man at all, to his mind.

Suddenly, later in the morning, a frightful thought rushed into his mind. He went back over those words Casanave had uttered: "He told me to take the tiller while he sent Ricks below on an errand." There, by his own statement, Casanave had been alone with the young officer. And, earlier in the night, Casanave had been talking to Ricks about mutiny and gold. "It's your chance! I'm not the only one in it." In what?

Murder. The purser and carpenter had vanished that first night. Now Ricks, who had threatened Casanave, and young Lewis. Who was in this murder-plot with the strapping, tattooed gunner—the man who had talked about gold and piracy, and Dominic You? The gunner who had learned his trade aboard Lafitte's pirate fleet?

White began to sweat under all this swift and deadly suggestion. Here, sure enough, was something You should know! He started out on deck, for he had been breaking out some cabin stores; as he came to the companionway, he heard an oath above, a wild cry, a loud and furious shout. A figure stumbled through the opening above, only to pitch headfirst down the ladder. It was one of the seamen; blood was spurting from a terrible gash in his side. As White leaped to his side, he found the man already dead.

With one hot oath, knowing that his conjectures must have been correct, he

leaped for the ladder. A shot rang out on deck, then another. White gained the deck, only to draw back in horrified comprehension.

Not ten feet away, in the lee scuppers, Midshipman You lay dead; he had only that moment been killed. Casanave, a smoking pistol in his hand, stood at a little distance, watching Gentry and the last of the seamen; the latter was running forward, Gentry was following him with a pistol in his hand. The pistol belched, and the seaman plunged headlong.

"Now take a look around for that damned White!" shouted Casanave, unaware that White was almost within touch of him. "Join me in the cap'n's cabin, when you've fixed White."

In that split second of time, White felt as he had when the squall hit. His brain raced; he was aware of a dozen things; time seemed suspended while he stood paralyzed. The bullet-hole in You's temple; the expression of utterly savage ferocity on Casanave's face; the wild, insane glitter of his eyes; Gentry, heaving the man he had just killed out through the yawning gap in the bulwarks. Then Casanave darted at You's body and began to go through the pockets.

White drew back, with a shudder. Hardened though he was, this business actually made his stomach revolt. He stumbled down the ladder past the dead man and bolted into the after passage. Gentry—to think of it! A scoundrelly sort of rascal, yes; but an enlisted man just the same. Not like Ricks, who had not even taken that talk of gold and mutiny in earnest. Gentry had swallowed it all, had done murder.

And where the devil had Casanave obtained the pistols? All arms were locked away.

He must have broken into something, somewhere. White himself was in a frantic state to get hold of a weapon; he knew of none. Those two would be after him like dogs after a rabbit in no time. They would murder him on the spot—

He drew a deep breath, paused, got himself in hand. His panic was swept away by a furious anger, by an Indian craft. First, save his life; second, fight! Not for the ship, but for himself, for his own sake. He was no old Navy man. He felt no stern and heroic compulsion to duty. Curly White was just an average man in one hell of a jam, and he meant to get out of it.

They would be after the gold first, after him next, to get him out of the way. He listened, and heard them coming down the companion-ladder, cursing excitedly. Hide? He could do better than that, even. He had been in the purser's cabin not half an hour ago, looking around for anything that might prove worth while—yes, Curly White was not above a bit of loot. No use trying to conceal the fact. He was not above a bit of liquor, either, if he could find any, but none had turned up.

NOW he darted into the purser's cabin and quietly turned the key in the lock. He heard the two of them stamping around. You had locked the cabin of Lieutenant Downes. Not pausing to get the right key, Casanave swore luridly and hurled himself against the door. Next moment it was splintered.

White paused to hear no more, but darted to the port, and got it open. Outside was hanging a mess of cordage that dangled over the rail above. He wormed himself out of the open port, caught one of the ropes, and drew himself to the rail. Here was a tangle of lines and canvas left from the wrecked tophamper; no one had had time to clear it away, as yet. White glanced at it, then looked forward, past the body of You, to where he had been working over the day's food.

"By glory, I never thought of it!" he muttered, and went hastily along the deck. Not running lest the pad-pad of his feet catch the ears of the two men below.

Then he had what he wanted—the cook's carving knife. He caught it up with a grin. It was a stout, heavy blade, not unlike a bowie knife in shape and size, good to carve up a canebrake bear or slash into a river bully. With this in hand, White returned to the quarter-deck and snaked himself beneath the tangle of cordage and canvas, until satisfied that he was well hidden from sight. He even managed to make a peep-hole that gave him a glimpse of the after companionway.

He had settled down into grim reality, now. All his first panic of horror, all his incredulity, was gone; here was a game as ruthless and intent as any brush with redskins or river pirates. It was wits and knife against odds and pistols. If he lost any chance that might be given him, he was a goner.

He waited for a long time, hidden there. Suddenly he heard voices, and peered out. Gentry and Casanave were standing on the deck, sweeping it with their gaze; they turned and came aft to the tiller. The course was being changed; the schooner heeled over as she turned, and the tiller was made fast. Casanave showed features stamped by a wild exultation. His eyes positively flamed. Here was a man no longer sane.

"Leave him alone!" he cried, pointing to the dead midshipman. "The son of Dominic You in command, dead or alive, is a good omen! We have the gold and—"

"But where the devil is that damned steward?" exclaimed Gentry.

"Hiding. No matter; we'll turn him up later," and Casanave laughed. "Keep your two pistols handy. The other arms are locked up. He can't get at them."

Gentry was obviously uneasy. "Well, listen to me, will you?" he rasped. "That gold ain't going to do us any good. The first ship that picks us up will turn us over. By God, I didn't stop to think of that! But it's clear enough now, and I don't like it."

"Look there—see that blue line? Land! That's Cuba!" Casanave gripped his arm and swung him around, pointing. "You fool, we're not going to be in this schooner another half hour! Let Curly stew in his own juice. We'll put the gold into those jugs, put them in the small boat, and go, with anything else we want to take along. I can talk any French or Spanish ship that picks us up into taking us for shipwrecked men; or we can make the Cuban coast and sail in with our story—come on, get to work! Get the jugs ready. I'll bring up the gold."

GENTRY detained him, with a look around.

"Wait! This wind is uncertain. If we're leaving the schooner, let's get the canvas off her; cut the lines, anything."

The other nodded assent. The wounded *Grampus* lost way as her canvas fluttered down haphazard; she floated crippled and bare. White, more than a little puzzled by the talk of gold and jugs, lay quiet and waited. For the moment, he could do nothing else. Against those pistols, he was helpless.

Casanave came staggering up from below with the treasure chest. Gentry appeared with four big wicker-covered demijohns. Sitting down near the companionway, the two went to work, and White suddenly understood the scheme. The jugs were half-emptied of the molasses they contained—and into them went the gold.

No one who picked up the small boat would suspect, except possibly by the weight, that those jugs held treasure.

Then the two got up food and a water-breaker, and gave their attention to the dinghy. This, securely chocked and tarpaulined, under the break of the quarter-deck, had survived that bursting inrush of water by reason of its position, when everything else had been swept away. The little boat was cut clear, put over into the water, and made fast by a line to the taff-rail as the schooner floated. Gentry got

into her, and Casanave passed down to him the provisions and the jugs.

"Stow 'em well aft," Casanave commanded. "Break out that mast and sail, and get the mast stepped."

"But what about the ship?" Gentry questioned.

The other broke into a hard laugh. "I'm seeing to that now. A train into the magazine, and she'll not worry us. Anything you want from below?"

"Nothing more than we have. Don't take anything with the ship's name on it! We can scrape that off the boat, here, but—"

"Don't worry." Casanave laughed again, then turned and disappeared down the companionway.

Curly White trembled suddenly, as he lay hidden. The magazine! Casanave had the keys, of course; he meant to lay a train to the powder, blow up the ship, and be off for Cuba with the dinghy and the gold.

The little boat, under the counter of the schooner, was out of sight. The decks were empty, except for the body of You. With an effort, White stirred and moved, crept out of his shelter, and rose to his feet. The tip of the dinghy's mast came into sight, as Gentry got it stepped.

Strained, intent, silent as an Indian in his bare feet, White crept to the lee rail. There lay his one and only means of escape; here was the sole chance he would have, with one man in the boat, the other down below. If he missed the chance, he was utterly lost.

He came to the rail. Inch by inch, he lifted his head until he could see the dinghy below. A flutter of canvas. Gentry was at work with the scrap of sail, getting the halliards rigged. His two pistols lay on the thwart just behind him, as he worked. Here was the line that held the boat fast.

White reached out for it, brought down the knife, and severed the hemp. Sudden frantic haste spurred him now; at any instant Casanave might appear on deck. Gentry had his back turned. Holding the end of the cut rope, White straddled the rail and jumped. As he did so, Gentry caught the stir of motion, glanced around, and with a startled oath swooped for his pistols.

The lurch of the boat as White came down spoiled his intent. He knocked one pistol from the thwart, but caught up the other, as White came for him with eyes ablaze and knife poised.

White felt the blast of fire, the stinging reek of powder grains and smoke in his very face. His free arm had swept out desperately, struck something; the bullet, at all events, did not reach him. Blinded, he dove in with his knife, impacted against Gentry, felt the steel thud home. He wrenched it free and struck again. Gentry was cursing, crying out, falling. White came down across the thwarts, as the boat rocked and a heavy splash sounded alongside.

He could see nothing.

In his brain remained the picture of the sail and lines. He fumbled around, found the halliards, yanked at them and made fast, all by sense of touch. He could feel the boat drawing to the pull, rising and falling, climbing the long swells and hissing over and down. He scrambled aft and found the tiller shipped, and sank down beside it in the stern-sheets, fumbling at his eyes with one hand. Blind! The terror of it seized him.

He could distinguish the light. Presently, as the pain lessened a bit, he was able to make out, very faintly, the objects around him. He dashed salt water over his face and eyes; they were puffing, but the salt spray helped. After all, he was not entirely blind. It would pass. The pain was in his lids, it seemed, not in the eyeballs. His fear lessened.

What of Casanave, back there aboard the schooner? He could not tell. His puffed and watering and paining eyes cleared only to a small radius of vision.

But, when suddenly the air rocked and reeled, when a hot blast shook the boat, he stood up and shook his fist exultantly, a wild laugh breaking from him. Casanave—with no escape from the explosion he had set!

And it was now that the purpose came to him, the suggestion, the idea. What awaited him back at home? Nothing, except at the best a mere pittance of a pension.

Here was gold safely hidden. Yonder was Cuba, and beyond lay South America. A new life, a fresh start for a half-blind man—why not? He had only to make up a likely story, and the world was his!

So ended the tale that Señor Blanco of the Argentine told us, there in a corner of the Press Club in Washington. He laid down his cigar and smiled at us. Belt, the Canadian, was lost in the narrative, wide-eyed and intent. Fellows was frowning and worried.

"Well, well, señor!" exclaimed Fellows in his rather irritating way. "That's a most interesting narrative. We must have a copy of it for the Department, by all means; it solves one of our most annoying mysteries. You have proofs? This man White reached Cuba or South America?"

"That is for you to decide," said Señor Blanco gently, and rose. "No, I regret to say there are no proofs existing."

"But how did you get the story, and where?" persisted Fellows.

Señor Blanco merely smiled and shrugged. Then, as he turned away, he made reply. "Oh, it is just tradition! Good afternoon, gentlemen. We shall meet again, I hope."

Fellows stared after him, and uttered a dismayed word.

"Confound it all! Tradition? Not a bit of it. Why, there are details there about the ship, the men, the officers—he couldn't have made it up!"

Belt leaned back with a grin. "He didn't. Don't you get the most salient point of all, Fellows—the reason he won't tell where he got the story?"

"No." Fellows stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Hasn't it struck you that, if Currly White reached the Argentine, let us say—he'd naturally change his name to Blanco? Sure he would. And anybody descended from him might be damned slow to bring up any proofs of that story! Especially a diplomat."

Fellows swallowed hard as he realized the truth, and his face was a picture. So far as his Department was concerned, the mystery of the *Grampus* would remain a mystery.

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THE U.S.S. *GRAMPUS*

IN connection with the Bedford-Jones Mysterious Disappearance story in this issue, B-J sent us on a letter he had received from the office of Naval Records and Library in Washington, enclosing a short historical sketch of the ill-fated *Grampus*. Here it is:

U.S.S. *Grampus*, Schooner of 12 guns, 184 tons (Emmons). (Chappell in his "List of Sailing Men of War and Packets of the Continental Congress and U.S. Navy from 1775 to 1852" published in *The Mariner*, Oct, 1933–Oct. 1934, gives 10 guns, 171½ tons.) She was designed by Henry Eckford and built under the supervision of William Doughty at the Washington Navy Yard, 1820–21, at a cost of about $23,627. Her dimensions were: length overall 97 feet; beam 23 feet 6 inches; depth in hold 9 feet 6 inches. She was launched early in August of 1821.

Early in March, 1843, the *Grampus*, under Lieutenant Albert E. Downes, left Norfolk, Va., to cruise on the coast. She was off Charleston bar from March 11 to 15, and was lost at sea with all on board. The last heard of her was through a letter mailed at Charleston on March 14, stating that the ship would be at Norfolk between April 8 and 15.

There was a list of officers on board the *Grampus* when she sailed for Norfolk on February 23, 1843. All are listed in Hamersly's "General Register" as having been lost with her, with the exception of the captain's clerk, who cannot be traced from that source as Hamersly does not list the names of captains' clerks.

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Automatic Blow

I WENT from cruiser service to submarine duty because "Chuck" Wellsby did. Chuck went in because he got himself married and wanted to stay close to home. Submarines don't often go on long protracted cruises as does the rest of the fleet, but stay around fairly close to their home port except, of course, when transferred from one base to another. That is, such used to be the case, and I'm speaking now of the old F. H. and K. boats twenty-five years ago. I don't know what these new modern craft do that carry six inch guns and launch a fast pursuit ship forward of their conning towers. All the old K. boats had, other than torpedo tubes, was a half K. W. spark set and a prayer. If something went wrong with the boat and you got out of it, you either paddled around in your B. V. Deezes until something picked you up, or you sank.

We put two of the K. boats in commission in Seattle where they were built and for a six-weeks' period, went through all the misery of test runs for this, test runs for that, full power dive tests, tests, tests, tests, until test was in your hair and in your sleep. Besides that, each man aboard had to know every bolt, pipe, valve, and piece of machinery on the ship, put his finger on it blindfolded, name it, tell what it was for and be able to operate it in the event of emergency; and those sea pigs being one hundred and fifty feet long, eighteen deep, and different from any formerly built, were full of more gadgets and equipment than a screen wire is holes. Then, after so long a time the boats were accepted by the government, but ordered to the Mare Island Navy Yard for additional tests and a change in some equipment which is where the fun begins in this story, if you call it fun.

No sooner had we docked at the California yard than a flock of workmen, draftsmen, and engineers came aboard and proceeded to tear out equipment and install new. One of the new pieces was a device called an "Automatic Blow." To make this understandable, let me explain something about a submarine and how it operates. Shaped much like a big cigar, the lower half consists of a series of tanks called, respectively: main ballast, trimming, adjusting and auxiliary. Getting ready to submerge, the main ballast tanks are first flooded to pull the ship down to the water line. Proper level is then obtained by flooding or draining the trimming tanks, one being located forward under the torpedo tubes and one aft under the engines. Final submersion is obtained by flooding the adjusting tank amid ship.

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When all tanks are flooded the ship has what is called a negative buoyancy, that is, it won't float. While a submarine can go to the bottom and lie there in comparatively shallow water, say one to three hundred feet, when in deep water and submerged, she must keep on the move and regulate her depth by her horizontal rudders, otherwise she would sink like an anvil and the pressure of the water, which increases as the square of the depth, would crush her like an egg when she got down too far.

Each tank has one entrance and one outlet, the outlet coming up through the boat to the top is called a vent. This lets the air out so the water can come in. The entrance is a mushroom-shaped affair called a Kingston valve, and all tank Kingston valves are controlled by one man in the operating compartment along side of, and directly under the eyes of, the commanding officer. Contrary to public surmise, when ready to come to the surface, the water is not pumped out of a submarine, but is blown out by compressed air. Pumping would be far too slow.

Anyway, this device I'm speaking of had just recently been perfected and was designed to automatically turn the air on and blow the water out, bringing the ship to the surface in the event all hands were, so to speak, hors de combat. It depended for its operation on the pressure of water becoming greater as the depth increased, until at a designated depth, it adjusted a piston, which would move in, open a valve in the air manifold, which in turn opened the Kingston valves and out the water would go. Somewhere off Angel Island in San Francisco Bay everything was set, the regular air manifold operator stood back, half speed ahead orders were given. The nose pointed to China and away we went. One hundred feet down, Mr. Automatic was supposed to do its stuff and bring us up, but for some reason still undiscovered by me, it didn't, so we kept going down. Two hundred and eighty-seven feet, stuck our nose fifteen feet in a mud bottom, and stayed there. Had it been in a coral or rock area, I would probably by now have either long wings or a forked tail, more likely the latter. Had it been deeper we would probably be going yet, but luck was with us. Even at that, hitting a mud bottom with 1,000 tons, at six knots is no gentle love tap. Except for a few bruises, all hands were O. K. We hit at about a ninety-degree angle with our tail up. I believe the Skipper had hold of the hand operated air manifold before we stuck. Anyway, it didn't take him long to blow the tanks and get the water out, but no go, we were too deep in the mud. The next move was to throw the motors in reverse and waggle the rudder. Still no go. About thirty minutes later when we commenced to have visions of coming out of the conning tower hatch one at a time and up through two hundred and eighty-seven feet of frigid Pacific Ocean water, the old man flooded his after tanks, went ahead on one propeller, astern on the other, and jerked her loose. We came to the top like a rocket, stern first, popped half out of the water from our empty tanks and finally settled to an even keel. There wasn't even a dent in the bow, and even the mud worked off on the way back, but the automatic blow came out when we got back to the navy yard.

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